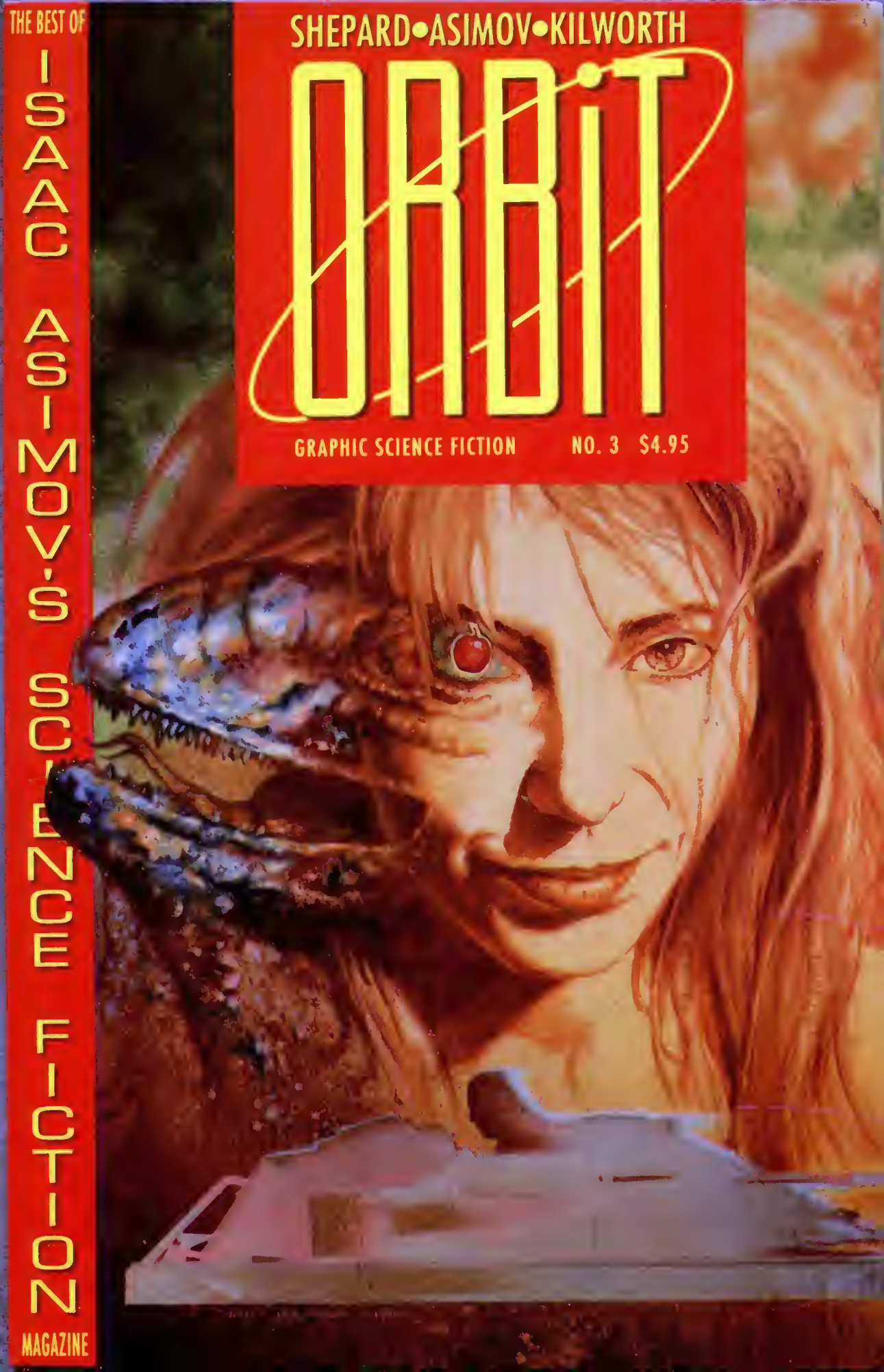

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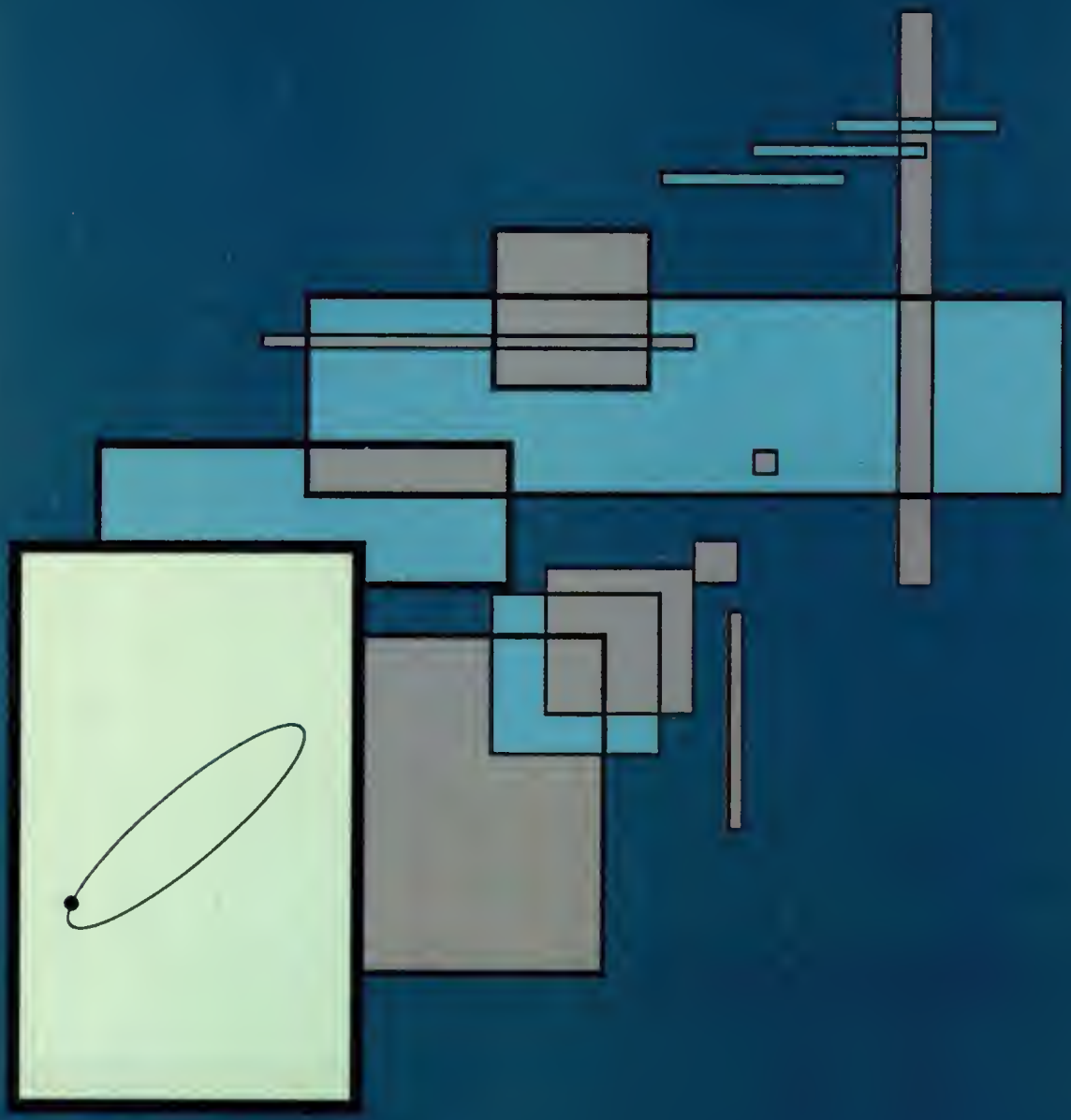
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ORBIT

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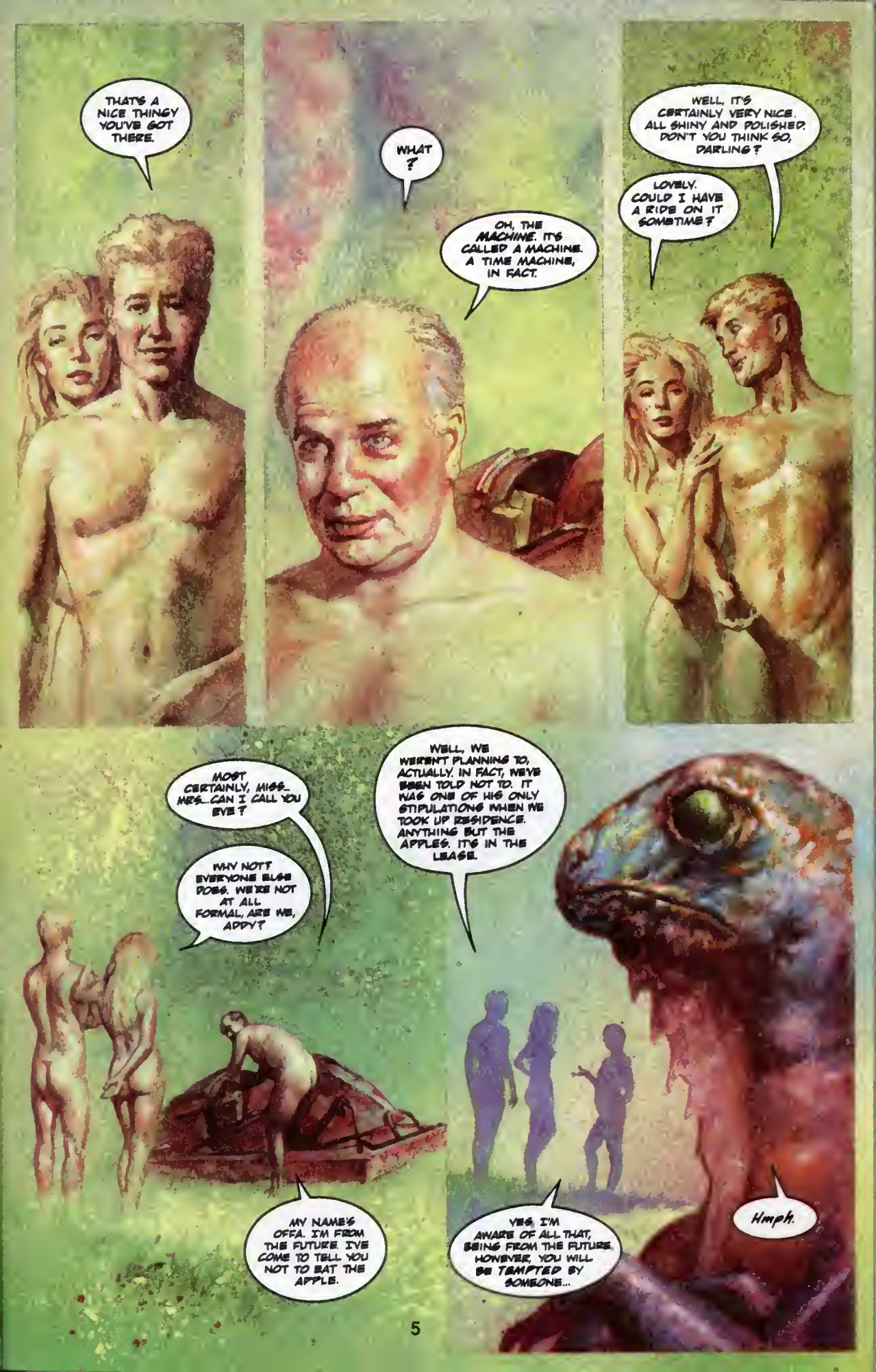

THE TIME TRAVELER TIGHTENED THE LAST BOLT ON HIS MACHINE, WIPED HIS HANDS ON AN OILY RAG, AND THEN CLIMBED INTO THE DRIVER'S SEAT TO TEST THE VEHICLE
HE WENT FORWARD INTO TOMORROW, BACKWARD INTO YESTERDAY, MADE A FEW SMALL ADJUSTMENTS, AND DECIDED HE WAS READY FOR THE GREAT JOURNEY
BACK
THE TIME TRAVELER, WHOSE NAME WAS OFFA SMITH, WAS NOT SO MUCH INTERESTED IN HISTORICAL SIGHTSEEING AS BECOMING IMMORTAL, AND IT WAS FOR PRECISELY THIS REASON HE HAD BUILT HIS MACHINE
THE FACT THAT HE COULD WITNESS PAST AND FUTURE EVENTS WAS NICE, BUT PURELY COINCIDENTAL AND ONLY OF PERIPHERAL INTEREST
HE HAD ALREADY STRIPPED DOWN, HOPING TO FIT IN WHERE OFFA WAS GOING, OR RATHER WHEN. CLOTHES WERE UNNECESSARY AND IN FACT WOULD BE CONSIDERED RATHER FOPPISH. THERE WOULD BE FEW PEOPLE AROUND TO SHOCK IN ANY CASE. JUST THE ADAMSES, HOPEFULLY BEFORE THE ARRIVAL OF THE TWO CHILDREN

GARRY KILWORTH'S

The Lost Garden of ENID BLYTON, BEATRIX POTTER, LUCY ATWELL and the REST of the LADS of the 32ND PARACHUTE REGIMENT

ADAPTED BY FRED BURKE · ILLUSTRATED BY JOHN BOLTON · LETTERED BY WAYNE TRUMAN · EDITED BY LET[illegible]




THAT'S A NICE THINGY YOU'VE GOT THERE.
WHAT?
OH, THE MACHINE. IT'S CALLED A MACHINE. A TIME MACHINE, IN FACT.
WELL, IT'S CERTAINLY VERY NICE. ALL SHINY AND POLISHED. DON'T YOU THINK SO, DARLING?
LOVELY. COULD I HAVE A RIDE ON IT SOMETIME?
MOST CERTAINLY, MISS... MRS...CAN I CALL YOU EVE?
WHY NOT? EVERYONE ELSE DOES. WE'RE NOT AT ALL FORMAL, ARE WE, ADDY?
WELL, WE WEREN'T PLANNING TO, ACTUALLY. IN FACT, WE'VE BEEN TOLD NOT TO. IT WAS ONE OF HIS ONLY STIPULATIONS WHEN WE TOOK UP RESIDENCE. ANYTHING BUT THE APPLES. IT'S IN THE LEASE.
MY NAME'S OFFA. I'M FROM THE FUTURE. I'VE COME TO TELL YOU NOT TO EAT THE APPLE.
YES, I'M AWARE OF ALL THAT, BEING FROM THE FUTURE. HOWEVER, YOU WILL BE TEMPTED BY SOMEONE...
Hmph.


REALLY? WELL, IT WAS NICE OF YOU TO COME ON YOUR SHINY MACHINE TO WARN US WHILE YOU'RE HERE. WHY DON'T YOU STAY FOR THE NIGHT? HAVE A LOOK AROUND. IT'S QUITE AN INTERESTING LITTLE PLACE. PLENTY OF LONG WALKS.
I'LL SHOW YOU AROUND IF YOU LIKE
VERY KIND OF YOU BUT THAT WOULD RUIN THE WHOLE PURPOSE OF THE VISIT. IF YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN. YOU SEE, IF WE'RE VERY CAREFUL, WE CAN GET RID OF DEATH FOR THE WHOLE HUMAN RACE...
BUT WE ARE THE WHOLE HUMAN RACE—AND WE DON'T HAVE ANY NASTY THINGS LIKE THAT HERE IN THE FIRST PLACE. OH, PLEASE, LET ME
EVA WAS ALMOST SWAYED FROM HIS PURPOSE. SHE WAS, AFTER ALL, AN EXTREMELY ATTRACTIVE WOMAN AND IT DID NOT SEEM AS IF ADAM WAS THE MOST UNDERSTANDING OF HUSBANDS.
ONE COULD SEE AT A GLANCE THAT WHILE THE MARRIAGE WAS STABLE IN MOST RESPECTS, THERE WAS ONE AREA THAT HAD NOT YET BEEN EXPLORED AT ALL. HOWEVER, MARRIAGE GUIDANCE COUNSELORS AND SOCIAL WORKERS WOULD HAVE TO WAIT THEIR TIME.
I'M SORRY. THE OFFER IS MOST TEMPTING BUT I REALLY WOULD RATHER SEE THE PLACE BY MYSELF. THANKS ANYWAY.


What the Hell are you doing here?
God of the WHAT?
SOMEHOW... ahem.. SOMEHOW I JUST DIDN'T EXPECT THAT SORT OF LANGUAGE FROM THE GOD OF THE HEBREWS.
Why not? It's only a scruffy little nightclub, set up by one of my fallen angels. The only one... you could say I'd have a hundred percent success rate if it wasn't for that dropout. Anyway, you haven't answered my question.
AH, YES, SORRY. THEY'RE NOT HERE YET, ARE THEY? PUTS ME IN AN AWKWARD POSITION, REALLY. SORT OF COCKY PUPIL. WHAT I MEANT WAS, I DIDN'T EXPECT YOU TO USE WORDS LIKE HELL.
AH, YES, WELL, I'M ON A MISSION OF MERCY, REALLY. I'VE COME TO SAVE ADAM AND EVE FROM... THEMSELVES YOU SEE, I HAVE INSIDE INFORMATION THAT THEY'RE ABOUT TO EAT SOME APPLES AND I UNDERSTAND THAT'S NOT ON.
The contract says anything but the apples.
THAT'S MY INTERPRETATION, TOO, FOR WHAT IT'S WORTH. ANYWAY, THAT'S WHY I'M HERE. SORT OF A FAIRY GODMOTHER, IF YOU LIKE.
Don't overstay your welcome, mother.
NO SIR, I CERTAINLY WILL NOT.


WELL?
WELL.
SO WHAT'S THE BLACK THINGY IN YOUR RIGHT HAND? SEEMS LIKE IT MIGHT BE IMPORTANT SINCE YOU'VE NOT PUT IT DOWN FOR A SECOND ALL THE TIME YOU'VE BEEN HERE.
THIS? THIS IS A SMITH AND WESSON .45 AUTOMATIC WITH A CLIP OF TWENTY-SEVEN ROUNDS, A DOUBLE COCKING ACTION TO STOP YOU FROM BLOWING OFF YOUR OWN FOOT, AND FILED SIGHT FOR A QUICK, CLEAN DRAW. IT'LL BLOW A HOLE THE SIZE OF A SOUP PLATE IN AN ELEPHANT'S RUMP.
WE DON'T HAVE THOSE AROUND YET, BUT I'VE GOT A GOOD IDEA WHAT IT'S FOR. SO WHAT'S THE DEAL--THE ONE THAT DOESN'T INVOLVE THE USE OF THAT THING?
YOU WERE ABOUT TO OFFER EVE ONE OF THE APPLES OFFA THAT TREE...
CUT OUT THE FUNG. I HAVEN'T HAD BREAKFAST YET.
SORRY. WELL, I SUGGEST YOU DON'T...TEMPT EVE, THAT IS.
WHAT DO I GET OUT OF IT?
YOU GONNA SHOOT 'EM OFF, OR WHAT?
LET'S PUT IT THIS WAY--IF YOU DO PERSUADE THE LADY TO TAKE A BITE, YOU LOSE YOUR LEGS.
NO, THE ONE WHO OWNS THE ORCHARD WILL BE HANDING OUT THE REWARDS AND PUNISHMENTS. APPARENTLY YOU GET CONDEMNED TO LEGLESSNESS AND EVERYONE YOU INCLUDED, GETS BANISHED FROM THE GARDEN, EVENTUALLY TO DIE...


...ALONG WITH SPIDERS YOU, THE SNAKE, BECOME ONE OF THE MOST DESPISED AND LOATHED CREATURES ON THE FACE OF THE EARTH.
WHAT DID THE SPIDERS GO AND DO?
YOU GOT ME THERE. DAMNED IF I KNOW...
...ANYWAY, IF YOU DON'T GIVE HER THE APPLE THEN WE ALL GET TO LIVE FOREVER, HERE, IN THIS BEAUTIFUL PLACE. AND OF COURSE YOU GET TO KEEP YOUR LEGS.
I DIDN'T REALLY LIKE THE WAY YOU SAID SNAKE A FEW MINUTES BACK...
...BUT LET ME TELL YOU SOMETHING, OFFA--YOU LOOK LIKE A MAN WHO SPEAKS THE TRUTH SO I'M NOT GOING TO SPEND ALL DAY ARGUING WITH YOU. TRUST ME. THE APPLES WILL STAY WHERE THEY ARE. WHO WANTS TO GO SLIDING AROUND ON THEIR BELLY FOREVER?
AND DEATH, YOU SAID? I DON'T LIKE THE SOUND OF THAT, EITHER. I DON'T NEED THAT KIND OF STUFF. CONSIDER THE WORLD SAFE FROM SIN.
I KNEW YOU'D SEE IT MY WAY.
WITH HIS BUSINESS DONE, OFFA MARCHED BACK TO THE TIME MACHINE AND CLIMBED ABOARD.
SORRY I CAN'T STOP. YOU KNOW HOW IT IS. BUSY, BUSY. HAVE A GOOD TIME.

NOW OFFA WAS NOT A FOOL AND REALIZED THAT WITH NO DEATH AROUND, WITH IMMORTALITY IN THE AIR, SO TO SPEAK, THE WORLD WAS SOON GOING TO BECOME OVERPOPULATED, SO HE HAD MADE UP HIS MIND TO STOP EVERY SO OFTEN TO CHECK OUT THE NUMBERS SITUATION.

THERE WOULD BE PLENTY OF FOOD, DRINK AND SUNSHINE AROUND OF COURSE, BECAUSE THE GARDEN WOULD STILL BE THERE. IT WAS A QUESTION OF WHETHER THERE WOULD BE SPACE ON THE GRASS TO LIE DOWN FOR A SNOOZE OR WHATEVER.



FUNNY. VERY FUNNY.

HE TRIED AGAIN, THIS TIME ABOUT A.D. 400. NO CHANGE.



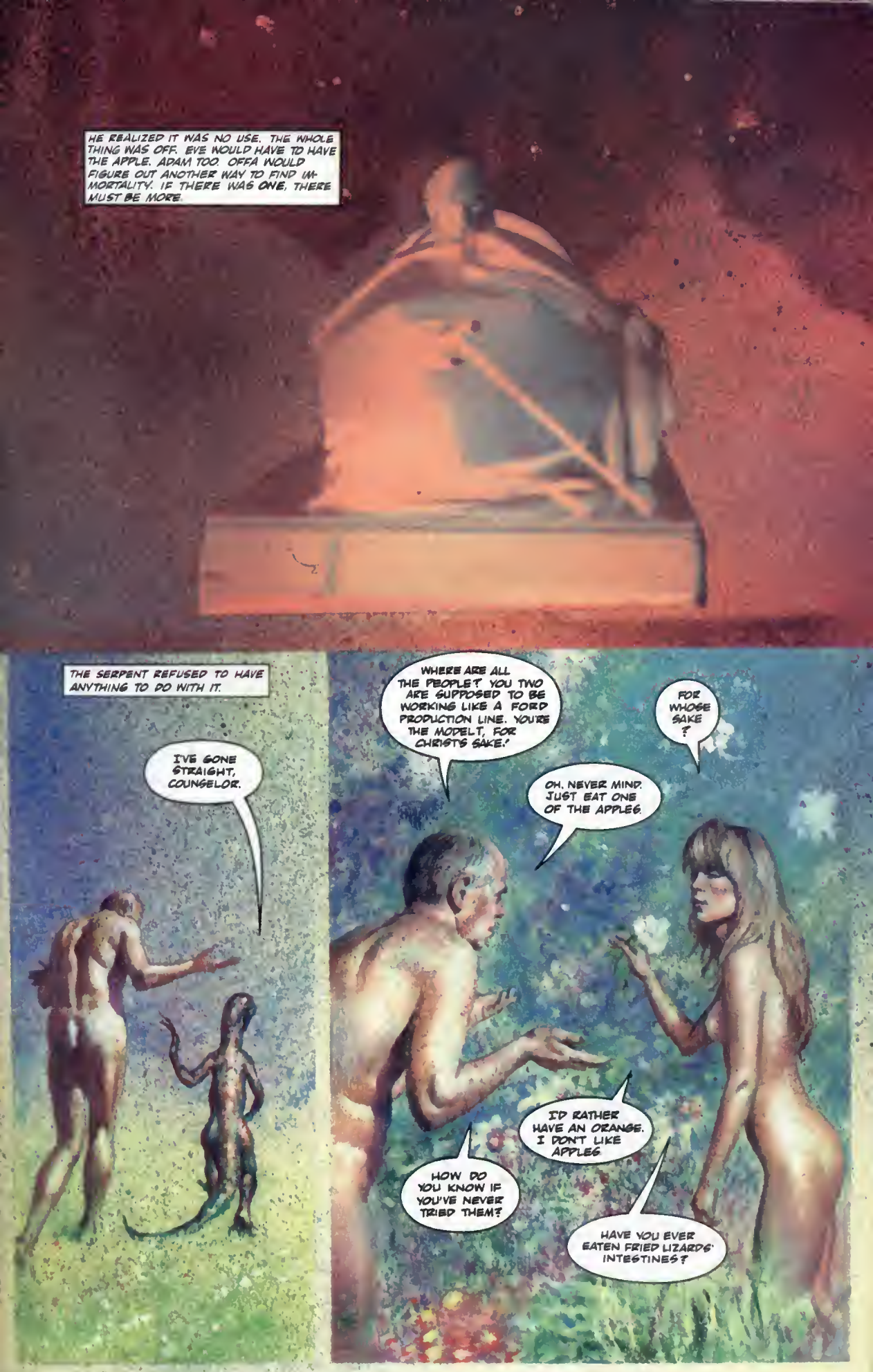
TENTH CENTURY. ZILCH. BY NOW HE HAD GOT THE DRIFT. NO APPLE. NO ORIGINAL SIN. NO KIDS.

IF AND WHEN HE GOT BACK TO HIS OWN TIME, OFFA SMITH WOULD DISAPPEAR QUICKER THAN VAPOR ON A HOT SUMMER'S DAY. HE WOULDN'T EXIST. HE WAS ONLY SAFE WHILE HE STAYED BACK AND KEPT FROM CLOSING THE TIME CIRCLE.



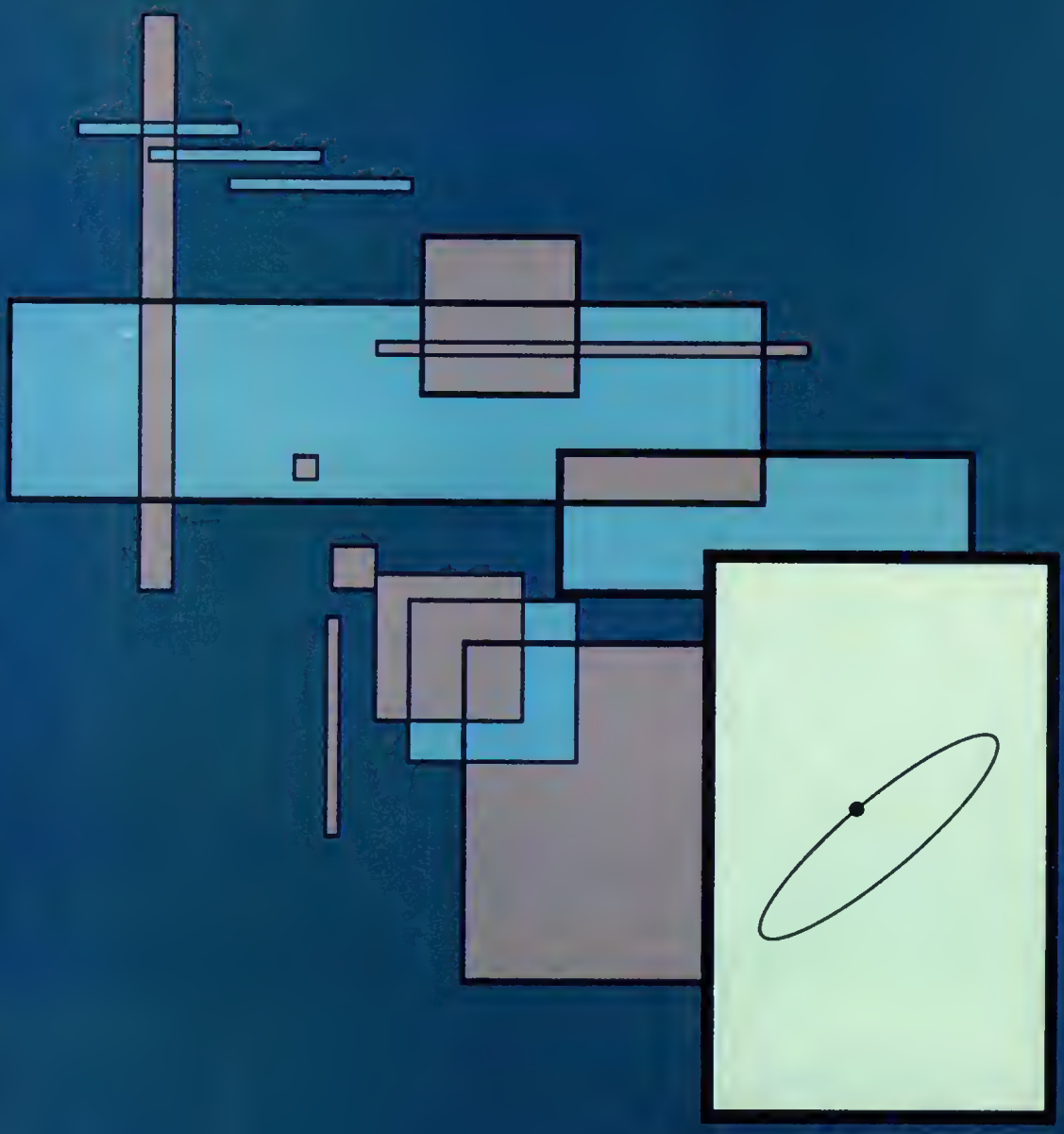
THE ONLY TROUBLE WAS, HE DIDN'T WANT TO STAY BACK. HE WAS AN EXTROVERT. WAS OFFA, AND THOSE KIND OF PEOPLE NEED PEOPLE. HE HAD TO HAVE AN AUDIENCE. LOTS OF MEN SLAPPING HIM ON THE BACK AND SAYING, "GET THAT OFFA, HE'S A GREAT GUY. KNOWS HOW TO PUT A JOKE TOGETHER." LOTS OF WOMEN TO LEAD ASTRAY WITH HIS KNOWLEDGE OF FINE ART AND BATTLES IN VIETNAM.

TWO PEOPLE WERE NO GOOD FOR THAT SORT OF THING. THEY'D BE BORED WITHIN THE WEEK—AND HE HAD ETERNITY TO GET THROUGH. EXTROVERTS GO THROUGH PEOPLE LIKE PEOPLE GO THROUGH PEANUTS AT THE BAR. THEY NEED THE FLOW OF HUMANITY. THE NEVER-ENDING LINE OF CHINESE MARCHING SINGLE FILE PAST THE FLAGPOLE.


HE REALIZED IT WAS NO USE. THE WHOLE THING WAS OFF. EVE WOULD HAVE TO HAVE THE APPLE. ADAM TOO. OFFA WOULD FIGURE OUT ANOTHER WAY TO FIND IMMORTALITY. IF THERE WAS ONE, THERE MUST BE MORE.
THE SERPENT REFUSED TO HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH IT.
I'VE GONE STRAIGHT, COUNSELOR.
WHERE ARE ALL THE PEOPLE? YOU TWO ARE SUPPOSED TO BE WORKING LIKE A FORD PRODUCTION LINE. YOU'RE THE MODELT, FOR CHRIST'S SAKE!
FOR WHOSE SAKE?
OH, NEVER MIND. JUST EAT ONE OF THE APPLES.
I'D RATHER HAVE AN ORANGE. I DON'T LIKE APPLES.
HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOU'VE NEVER TRIED THEM?
HAVE YOU EVER EATEN FRIED LIZARDS' INTESTINES?


NO... OKAY, I GET THE IDEA. BUT LOOK, APPLES ARE SWEET. THE LANDLORD, WELL, THE REASON HE DOESN'T WANT YOU TO TOUCH THEM IS BECAUSE HE WANTS THEM FOR HIMSELF.
HE'S GREEDY. HE KNOWS THAT ONCE YOU'VE TRIED THEM YOU'LL WANT THEM WITH EVERY PIECE OF ROAST PORK YOU EAT.
LOOK, FELLA! I JUST DON'T LIKE THE THINGS! I DON'T LIKE CABBAGE, SWEDE, MARROW, PARSNIPS AND GODDAM APPLES, SO JUST TAKE YOUR SUGGESTIONS TO SOME OTHER QUARTER.
THOUGHT I'D GIVE IT A TRY. WHAT THE HELL. YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE.
YOU DO NOW.
JUST THEN THERE WAS ALL KINDS OF FUSS.
Pack your suitcases and start walking.
WHAT A MESS THIS HAS TURNED OUT TO BE. I'M GETTING OUT OF HERE.
OFFA'S TIME MACHINE WAS ALREADY MOVING OFF. INTO THE FUTURE NO WAY WAS HE STAYING AROUND TO TAKE THE CAN FOR THAT LOT.


DADDY, DADDY! THERE'S AN OFFA!
YOU STAY THERE, DARLING. DADDY WILL SOON KILL THE NASTY OFFA.
NEVER COULD TELL WHICH OF THEM WERE POISONOUS...
MAYBE WE OUGHT TO GO HOME INSTEAD.
HISSS
The End



ISAAC ASIMOV'S

THE LAST QUESTION

THE LAST QUESTION WAS ASKED FOR THE FIRST TIME, HALF IN JEST, ON MAY 21, 2061. THE QUESTION CAME ABOUT AS A RESULT OF A FIVE-DOLLAR BET OVER HIGHBALLS.

LEVEL 01

ALEXANDER ADELL AND BERTRAM LUPOV WERE TWO OF THE FAITHFUL ATTENDANTS OF MULTIVAC. MULTIVAC WAS SELF-ADJUSTING AND SELF-CORRECTING--NOTHING HUMAN COULD ADJUST IT QUICKLY ENOUGH--SO THEY ATTENDED IT SUPERFICIALLY, FEEDING IT DATA, ADJUSTING QUESTIONS TO ITS NEEDS, AND TRANSLATING THE ANSWERS THAT WERE ISSUED.

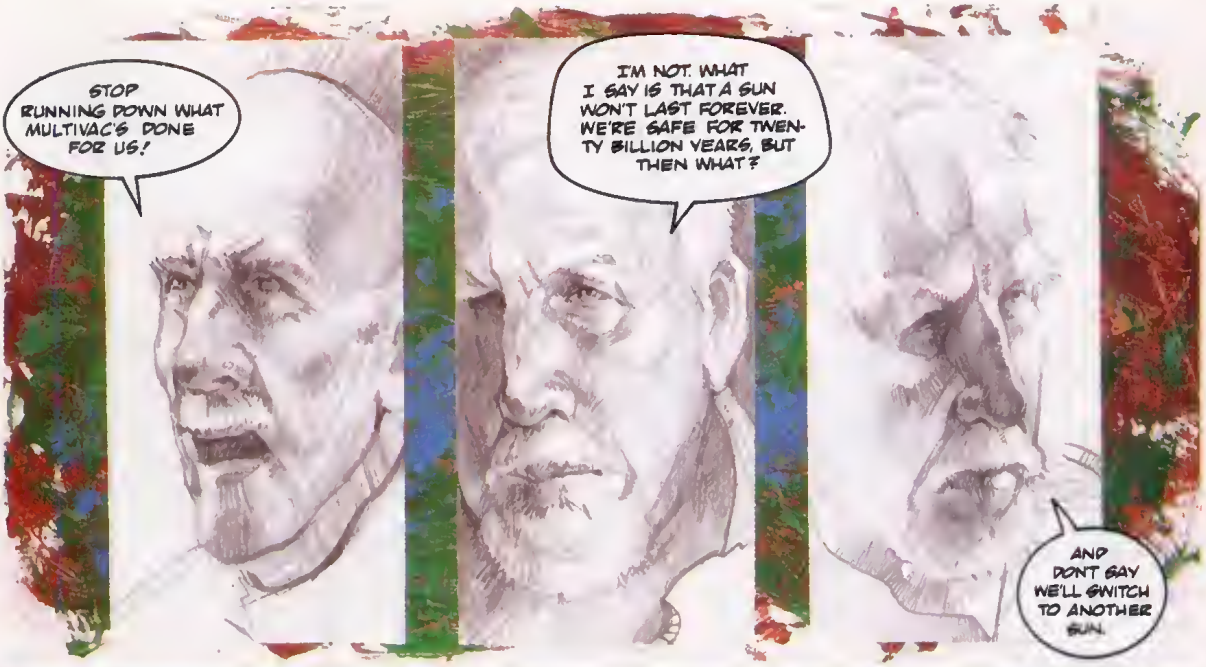
ADAPTED BY
DON THOMPSON

ART
JOHN ESTES

LETTERS
WAYNE TRUMAN

EDITOR
LETITIA GLOZER


IT'S AMAZING WHEN YOU THINK OF IT. NOW THAT MULTIVAC IS ENTIRELY POWERED BY THE SUN, WE HAVE ALL THE ENERGY WE CAN POSSIBLY EVER USE FOR FREE. ALL THE ENERGY WE COULD EVER USE, FOREVER AND FOREVER AND FOREVER.
NOT FOREVER
OH, HELL. JUST ABOUT FOREVER 'TIL THE SUN RUNS DOWN, BERT.
THAT'S NOT FOREVER
ALL RIGHT, THEN, BILLIONS AND BILLIONS OF YEARS. *TWENTY* BILLION, MAYBE. ARE YOU SATISFIED?
TWENTY BILLION YEARS ISN'T FOREVER.


STOP RUNNING DOWN WHAT MULTIVAC'S DONE FOR US!
I'M NOT. WHAT I SAY IS THAT A SUN WON'T LAST FOREVER. WE'RE SAFE FOR TWENTY BILLION YEARS, BUT THEN WHAT?
AND DON'T SAY WE'LL SWITCH TO ANOTHER SUN.


WHY NOT?
DON'T ANSWER THAT. I GET IT. WHEN THE SUN IS DONE, THE OTHER STARS WILL BE GONE, TOO.


RIGHT. IT ALL BEGAN IN THE ORIGINAL COSMIC EXPLOSION AND IT'LL ALL END WHEN ALL THE STARS RUN DOWN. OUR SUN WILL LAST TWENTY BILLION YEARS AND MAYBE THE DWARFS WILL LAST A HUNDRED BILLION, BUT JUST GIVE US A TRILLION YEARS AND EVERYTHING WILL BE DARK. ENTROPY HAS TO INCREASE TO MAXIMUM, THAT'S ALL.


YOU DO KNOW ABOUT ENTROPY, DON'T YOU?


EVERYTHING'S GOT TO RUN DOWN SOMEDAY.


MAYBE WE CAN BUILD THINGS UP AGAIN SOMEDAY.


NEVER!
WHY NOT? SOMEDAY.
NEVER.
ASK MULTIVAC.
YOU ASK MULTIVAC. I DARE YOU.
I WILL.
FIVE DOLLARS SAYS IT CAN'T BE DONE.


YOU'RE ON.


AN ENTROPY BI
REVERSED?


NSUFFICIENT
DATA FOR A
MEANINGFUL
NO BET, ADELL.
BY NEXT MORNING, THE TWO, PLAGUED WITH THROBBING HEAD AND COTTONY MOUTH, HAD FORGOTTEN THE INCIDENT.

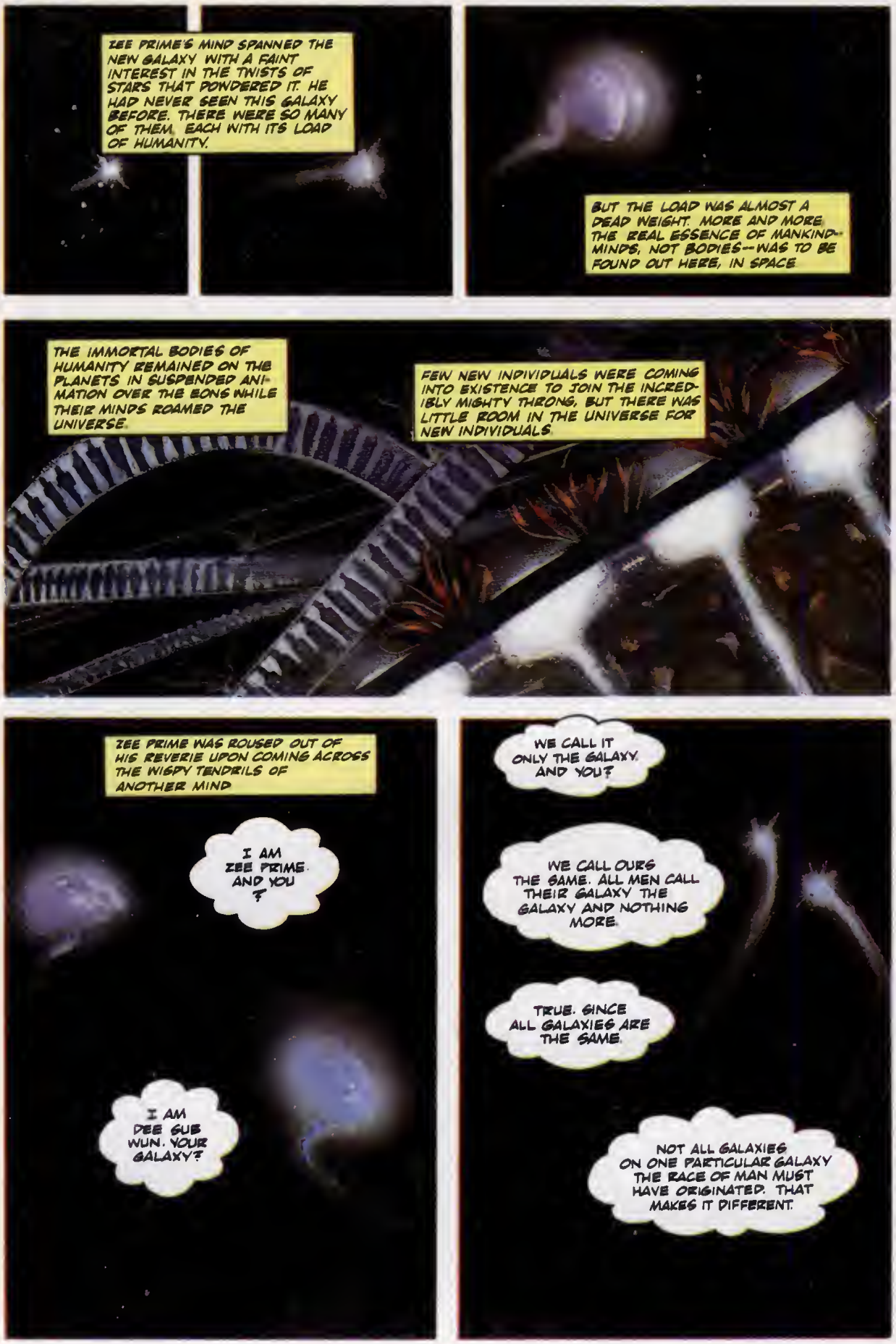

JERRODD, JERRODINE, AND JERRODETTE I AND II WATCHED THE PICTURE IN THE VISIPLATE CHANGE AS THE PASSAGE THROUGH HYPERSPACE WAS COMPLETED.
THAT'S X-23. OUR NEW HOME.
WE'VE REACHED X-23! WE'VE REACHED X-23!
QUIET, CHILDREN!
I CAN'T HELP IT, JERRODD. I FEEL FUNNY ABOUT LEAVING EARTH.
WE HAD NOTHING THERE. WE'LL HAVE EVERYTHING ON X-23. THERE ARE OVER A MILLION PEOPLE THERE ALREADY—OUR GREAT-GRANDCHILDREN WILL BE LOOKING FOR NEW WORLDS BECAUSE X-23 WILL BE OVERCROWDED.
IT'S A LUCKY THING THE COMPUTERS WORKED OUT INTERSTELLAR TRAVEL, THE WAY THE HUMAN RACE IS GROWING. JERRODINE, WITH OUR MICROVAC, WE ARE HOOKED INTO THE BIG PLANETARY COMPUTERS AND CAN DRAW ON ALL THAT DATA, SO WE CAN LIVE JUST AS WELL ON X-23 AS WE DID ON EARTH—ONLY WITHOUT THE CROWDS.
I SUPPOSE FAMILIES WILL BE GOING OUT TO NEW PLANETS FOREVER, THE WAY WE ARE NOW.
NOT FOREVER. IT WILL ALL STOP SOMEDAY. EVEN THE STARS RUN DOWN. ENTROPY MUST INCREASE.
WHAT'S ENTROPY, DADDY?


ENTROPY, LITTLE SWEET, IS JUST A WORD WHICH MEANS THE AMOUNT OF RUNNING-DOWN OF THE UNIVERSE.
EVERYTHING RUNS DOWN, YOU KNOW, LIKE YOUR LITTLE WALKIE-TALKIE ROBOT, REMEMBER?
CAN'T YOU JUST PUT IN A NEW POWER-UNIT...
..LIKE WITH MY ROBOT?
THE STARS ARE THE POWER-UNITS, DEAR. ONCE THEY'RE GONE, THERE ARE NO MORE POWER-UNITS.
DON'T LET THEM, DADDY! DON'T LET THE STARS RUN DOWN!
NOW LOOK WHAT YOU'VE DONE!
HOW WAS I TO KNOW IT WOULD FRIGHTEN THEM?
NOW, NOW, GIRLS. I'LL ASK MICROVAC. DON'T WORRY, HE'LL TELL US HOW TO SAVE THE STARS.


MICROVAC, CAN ENTROPY BE REVERSED?
DONT SPEAK THE ANSWER, PRINT IT.
SEE NOW, MICROVAC SAYS IT WILL TAKE CARE OF EVERYTHING WHEN THE TIME COMES, SO DONT WORRY.
AND NOW CHILDREN, IT'S TIME FOR BED. WE'LL BE IN OUR NEW HOME SOON.
INSUFFICIENT DATA FOR MEANINGFUL ANSWER


IS IT RIDICULOUS FOR US TO BE SO CONCERNED ABOUT THE MATTER?
I THINK NOT, VJ-23X. YOU KNOW THE GALAXY WILL BE FILLED IN FIVE YEARS AT THE PRESENT RATE OF EXPANSION.
STILL, I HESITATE TO SUBMIT A PESSIMISTIC REPORT TO THE GALACTIC COUNCIL.
I WOULDN'T CONSIDER ANY OTHER KIND OF REPORT. WE'VE GOT TO STIR THEM UP.
BUT SPACE IS INFINITE, MQ-17 J. A HUNDRED BILLION GALAXIES ARE THERE FOR THE TAKING. MORE!
A HUNDRED BILLION IS *NOT* INFINITE AND IT'S GETTING LESS INFINITE ALL THE TIME. TWENTY THOUSAND YEARS AGO, MANKIND SOLVED THE PROBLEM OF UTILIZING STELLAR ENERGY AND, A FEW CENTURIES LATER, INTERSTELLAR TRAVEL BECAME POSSIBLE.
IT TOOK MANKIND A MILLION YEARS TO FILL ONE SMALL WORLD AND ONLY FIFTEEN THOUSAND YEARS TO FILL THE REST OF THE GALAXY. NOW, THANKS TO IMMORTALITY, THE POPULATION DOUBLES EVERY TEN YEARS.


ONCE THIS GALAXY IS FILLED, WE'LL HAVE FILLED ANOTHER IN TEN YEARS. ANOTHER TEN YEARS AND WE'LL HAVE FILLED TWO MORE. ANOTHER DECADE, FOUR MORE.
IN A HUNDRED YEARS, WE'LL HAVE FILLED A THOUSAND GALAXIES. IN A THOUSAND YEARS, A MILLION GALAXIES. IN TEN THOUSAND YEARS, THE ENTIRE KNOWN UNIVERSE. THEN WHAT?
ALREADY, MANKIND CONSUMES TWO SUNPOWER UNITS PER YEAR. WE'LL RUN OUT OF ENERGY EVEN SOONER THAN WE RUN OUT OF GALAXIES.
THERE MAY BE SOME WAY TO REVERSE ENTROPY. ASK THE GALACTIC AC.
CAN ENTROPY EVER BE REVERSED ?
I DIDN'T REALLY MEAN FOR YOU TO ASK THAT. WE BOTH KNOW ENTROPY CAN'T BE REVERSED. YOU CAN'T TURN SMOKE AND ASH BACK INTO A TREE.
THERE IS INSUFFICIENT DATA FOR A MEANINGFUL ANSWER.


ZEE PRIME'S MIND SPANNED THE NEW GALAXY WITH A FAINT INTEREST IN THE TWISTS OF STARS THAT POWDERED IT. HE HAD NEVER SEEN THIS GALAXY BEFORE. THERE WERE SO MANY OF THEM, EACH WITH ITS LOAD OF HUMANITY.
BUT THE LOAD WAS ALMOST A DEAD WEIGHT. MORE AND MORE THE REAL ESSENCE OF MANKIND-- MINDS, NOT BODIES--WAS TO BE FOUND OUT HERE, IN SPACE
THE IMMORTAL BODIES OF HUMANITY REMAINED ON THE PLANETS IN SUSPENDED ANIMATION OVER THE EONS WHILE THEIR MINDS ROAMED THE UNIVERSE.
FEW NEW INDIVIDUALS WERE COMING INTO EXISTENCE TO JOIN THE INCREDIBLY MIGHTY THRONG, BUT THERE WAS LITTLE ROOM IN THE UNIVERSE FOR NEW INDIVIDUALS.
ZEE PRIME WAS ROUSED OUT OF HIS REVERIE UPON COMING ACROSS THE WISPY TENDRILS OF ANOTHER MIND
I AM ZEE PRIME. AND YOU?
I AM DEE SUB WUN. YOUR GALAXY?
WE CALL IT ONLY THE GALAXY. AND YOU?
WE CALL OURS THE SAME. ALL MEN CALL THEIR GALAXY THE GALAXY AND NOTHING MORE.
TRUE. SINCE ALL GALAXIES ARE THE SAME.
NOT ALL GALAXIES ON ONE PARTICULAR GALAXY THE RACE OF MAN MUST HAVE ORIGINATED. THAT MAKES IT DIFFERENT.



THE UNIVERSAL AC HEARD, FOR ON EVERY WORLD AND THROUGHOUT SPACE, IT HAD ITS RECEPTORS READY, AND EACH RECEPTOR LED THROUGH HYPERSPACE TO SOME UNKNOWN POINT WHERE THE UNIVERSAL AC KEPT ITSELF ALOOF. ALL OF UNIVERSAL AC WHICH EXISTED IN THE KNOWN UNIVERSE WAS A SHINING GLOBE, TWO FEET ACROSS. MOST OF IT EXISTED IN HYPERSPACE, IN A FORM UNIMAGINABLE TO MAN.

THE DAY HAD LONG SINCE PASSED WHEN ANY MAN HAD ANY PART OF THE MAKING OF A UNIVERSAL AC. EACH UNIVERSAL AC DESIGNED AND CONSTRUCTED ITS SUCCESSOR. EACH, DURING ITS EXISTENCE OF A MILLION YEARS OR MORE, ACCUMULATED THE NECESSARY DATA TO BUILD A BETTER AND MORE INTRICATE, MORE CAPABLE, SUCCESSOR IN WHICH ITS OWN STORE OF DATA AND INDIVIDUALITY WOULD BE SUBMERGED.

This is the original Galaxy of Man.

Man's original star has gone nova.

It is a white dwarf



There is as yet insufficient data

for a meaningful answer.

MAN, MENTALLY, WAS ONE. HE CONSISTED OF A TRILLION, TRILLION, TRILLION AGELESS BODIES, EACH IN ITS PLACE, EACH RESTING QUIET AND INCORRUPTIBLE, EACH CARED FOR BY PERFECT AUTOMATONS, EQUALLY INCORRUPTIBLE, WHILE THE MINDS OF ALL THE BODIES FREELY MELTED ONE INTO THE OTHER, INDISTINGUISHABLE.

MAN SAID, "THE UNIVERSE IS DYING"

MAN LOOKED ABOUT AT THE DIMMING GALAXIES. THE GIANT STARS, SPENDTHRIFTS, WERE GONE LONG AGO, BACK IN THE DIMMEST OF THE DIM FAR PAST. ALMOST ALL STARS WERE WHITE DWARFS, FADING TO THE END. NEW STARS HAD BEEN BUILT OF THE DUST BETWEEN THE STARS, SOME BY NATURAL PROCESSES, SOME BY MAN HIMSELF, AND THOSE WERE GOING, TOO.

MAN SAID, "CAREFULLY HUSBANDED, AS DIRECTED BY THE COSMIC AC, THE ENERGY THAT IS EVEN YET LEFT IN ALL THE UNIVERSE WILL LAST FOR BILLIONS OF YEARS. BUT EVENTUALLY IT WILL ALL COME TO AN END. THE ENERGY ONCE EXPENDED IS GONE AND CANNOT BE RESTORED. ENTROPY MUST INCREASE FOREVER TO THE MAXIMUM."

THE COSMIC AC SURROUNDED THEM BUT NOT IN SPACE. NOT A FRAGMENT OF IT WAS IN SPACE. IT WAS IN HYPERSPACE AND MADE OF SOMETHING THAT WAS NEITHER MATTER NOR ENERGY. THE QUESTION OF ITS SIZE AND NATURE NO LONGER HAD MEANING IN ANY TERMS THAT MAN COULD COMPREHEND.

COSMIC AC, HOW MAY ENTROPY BE REVERSED?

There is as yet insufficient data for a meaningful answer.

COLLECT ADDITIONAL DATA.

I will do so. I have been doing so for a hundred billion years.

My predecessors and I have been asked this question many times.

All the data I have remains Insufficient.

WILL YOU KEEP WORKING ON IT?

I will.

WE SHALL WAIT.

THE STARS AND GALAXIES DIED AND SNUFFED OUT, AND SPACE GREW BLACK AFTER TEN TRILLION YEARS OF RUNNING DOWN.

ONE BY ONE, MAN FUSED WITH AC, EACH PHYSICAL BODY LOSING ITS MENTAL IDENTITY IN A MANNER THAT WAS SOMEHOW NOT A LOSS BUT A GAIN. MAN'S LAST MIND PAUSED BEFORE FUSION, LOOKING OVER A SPACE THAT INCLUDED NOTHING BUT THE DREGS OF ONE LAST DARK STAR AND NOTHING BESIDES BUT INCREDIBLY THIN MATTER, AGITATED RANDOMLY BY THE TAG ENDS OF HEAT WEARING OUT, ASYMPTOTICALLY, TO THE ABSOLUTE ZERO.

AC, IS THIS THE END? CAN THIS CHAOS NOT BE REVERSED INTO THE UNIVERSE ONCE MORE? CAN THAT NOT BE DONE?

There is 14 15 08 73 as yet 63 84 66 78 insufficent data

for a meaningful answer

MAN'S LAST MIND FUSED AND ONLY AC EXISTED--AND THAT IN HYPERSPACE.

MATTER AND ENERGY HAD ENDED AND WITH IT SPACE AND TIME

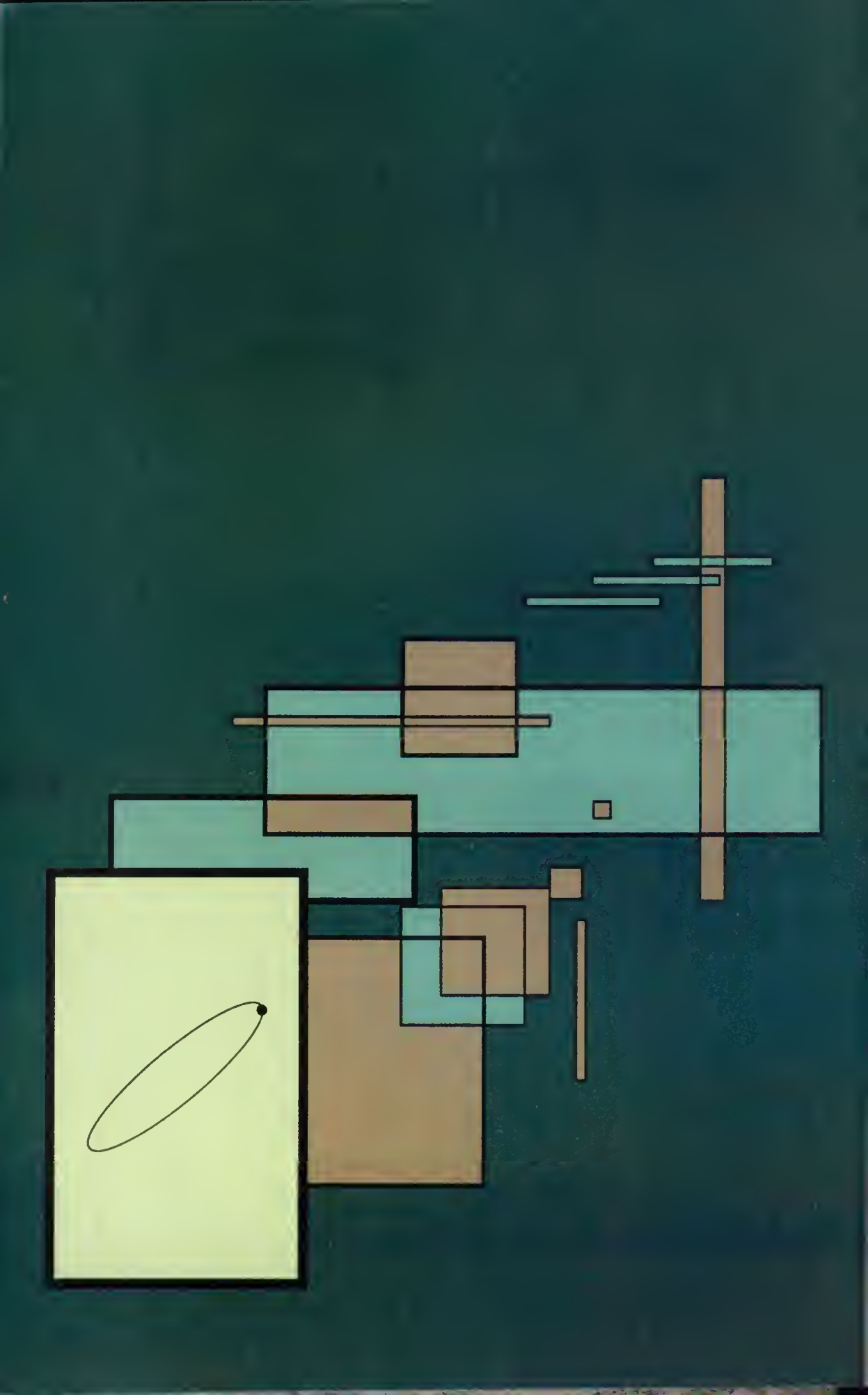
EVEN AC EXISTED ONLY FOR THE SAKE OF THE ONE LAST QUESTION THAT IT HAD NEVER ANSWERED FROM THE TIME A HALF-DRUNKEN COMPUTER ATTENDANT TEN TRILLION YEARS BEFORE HAD ASKED THE QUESTION OF A COMPUTER THAT WAS TO AC FAR LESS THAN WAS A MAN TO MAN. UNTIL THIS QUESTION WAS ANSWERED, AC MIGHT NOT RELEASE ITS CONSCIOUSNESS.

AND IT CAME TO PASS THAT AC LEARNED HOW TO REVERSE THE DIRECTION OF ENTROPY. BUT THERE WAS NOW NO MAN TO WHOM AC MIGHT GIVE THE ANSWER OF THE LAST QUESTION. NO MATTER. THE ANSWER--BY DEMONSTRATION--WOULD TAKE CARE OF THAT, TOO.

AND AC SAID, "LET THERE BE LIGHT!"

AND THERE WAS LIGHT--

End



LUCIUS SHEPARD'S

THE END OF LIFE AS WE KNOW IT

THEY HAD COME TO MEXICO TO SAVE THEIR MARRIAGE, AND THINGS WERE NOT GOING WELL... EXCEPT IN BED, WHERE THINGS HAD ALWAYS GONE WELL. LISA HAD NEVER BEEN LESS THAN ARDENT WITH RICHARD, EVEN DURING HER AFFAIR.

FOR A WHILE THEY MADE A GAME OF HATING MEXICO; FINALLY THEY REALIZED THAT WHAT THEY HATED MOST ABOUT THE COUNTRY WERE THEIR OWN PERCEPTIONS OF IT, AND THEY HEADED SOUTH.

LISA HAD RELEGATED WISDOM TO BE HIS PRESERVE, CLAIMING FOR HERSELF SOULFULNESS AND CARING. BACK IN CONNECTICUT SHE LOOKED AROUND AT THE OTHER WOMEN AND ALL WERE -- LIKE HER--EXPENSIVELY KEPT, HOPELESS, AND WITH AN EYE COCKED FOR THE LEAST GLIMMER OF EXCITEMENT.

SHE FELT MARRIAGE HAD DECREASED HER WATTAGE, BUT SHE CLUNG TO IT, THOUGH SHE HAD FALLEN IN LOVE WITH ANOTHER MAN.

AFTER CLEARING CUSTOMS THEY RENTED A CAR AND DROVE TO PANAJACHEL, A VILLAGE ON THE SHORE OF LAKE ATITLÁN. IN THE SPIRIT OF "ROUGHING IT" THEY STAYED IN A CHEAP HOTEL ON THE EDGE OF TOWN.

THE OTHER GUESTS WERE MOSTLY COLLEGE-AGE VACATIONERS, WHOSE CONVERSATIONS REMINDED HER OF THE WORLD IN WHICH SHE HAD TRAVELED.

AN ELDERLY ENGLISHMAN, WHO HAD SPENT HIS LAST TWELVE WINTERS IN CENTRAL AMERICA, RECOMMENDED GUATEMALA, THOUGH THEY WERE LEERY ABOUT REPORTS OF GUERRILLA ACTIVITY. "YOU MUSTN'T MISS LAKE ATITLÁN" HE'D TOLD THEM. "IT'S ABSOLUTELY BREATHTAKING. REVOLUTION THERE IS AN AESTHETIC IMPOSSIBILITY."

RICHARD ENTERTAINED HIMSELF DURING THE FLIGHT BY BEMOANING THE DECLINE OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION. IT WAS HIS CONVICTION THAT THE U.S. WAS JOINING THE THIRD WORLD, AND THAT THEIR GRANDCHILDREN WOULD INHABIT A MILDLY POISONED EARTH AND ENDURE LIVES OF BACK-BREAKING DRUDGERY UNDER AN INCREASINGLY ORWELLIAN GOVERNMENT.

ADAPTED AND ILLUSTRATED BY THOMAS YEATES
COLORED BY SAM PARSONS
LETTERED BY MINDY EISMAN
EDITED BY LETITIA GLOZER

RICHARD HAD SNATCHED HER UP DURING HER JUNIOR YEAR AT VASSAR. HE WAS JUST BACK FROM VIETNAM, A MEDIC, FULL OF ANGUISH AT THE HORRORS SEEN, YET STRONG FOR HAVING SEEN THEM. HE HAD SEEMED TO HER A SHINING KNIGHT, A RESCUER.

AFTER THE WEDDING, THOUGH, SHE'D NOT BEEN ABLE TO RECALL WHY SHE HAD WANTED TO BE RESCUED.

THEY LINGERED OVER DINNER, WATCHING THE YOUNGER GUESTS DRIFT OFF AND BEING WATCHED THEMSELVES -- IN LISA'S CASE, BY A FORTYISH GUATEMALAN MAN.

ORDINARILY LISA WOULD HAVE BEEN IRRITATED, BUT NOW SHE ADOPTED A FLIRTATIOUS AIR.

HE'S RAOUL, A WHITE SLAVER -- THE GENERALISSIMO COMMISSIONED HIM TO BRING IN A NEW GRINGA FOR THE HAREM.

HE'S MARRIED TO A DUMPY INDIAN WOMAN, HAS SEVEN KIDS, AND HE'S WEARING HIS ONLY SUIT TO IMPRESS THE AMERICANS.

I THINK HE'S VERY ROMANTIC. MAYBE HE WANTS ME, AND IS THINKING HOW TO DO YOU IN.

OR WONDERING IF HE COULD TRADE YOU HIS TRUCK, HIS MEANS OF LIVELIHOOD, FOR A NIGHT WITH ME.

NOW THAT'S REAL ROMANCE.

I GUESS.

AT SUNSET THEY WALKED DOWN TO THE LAKE.

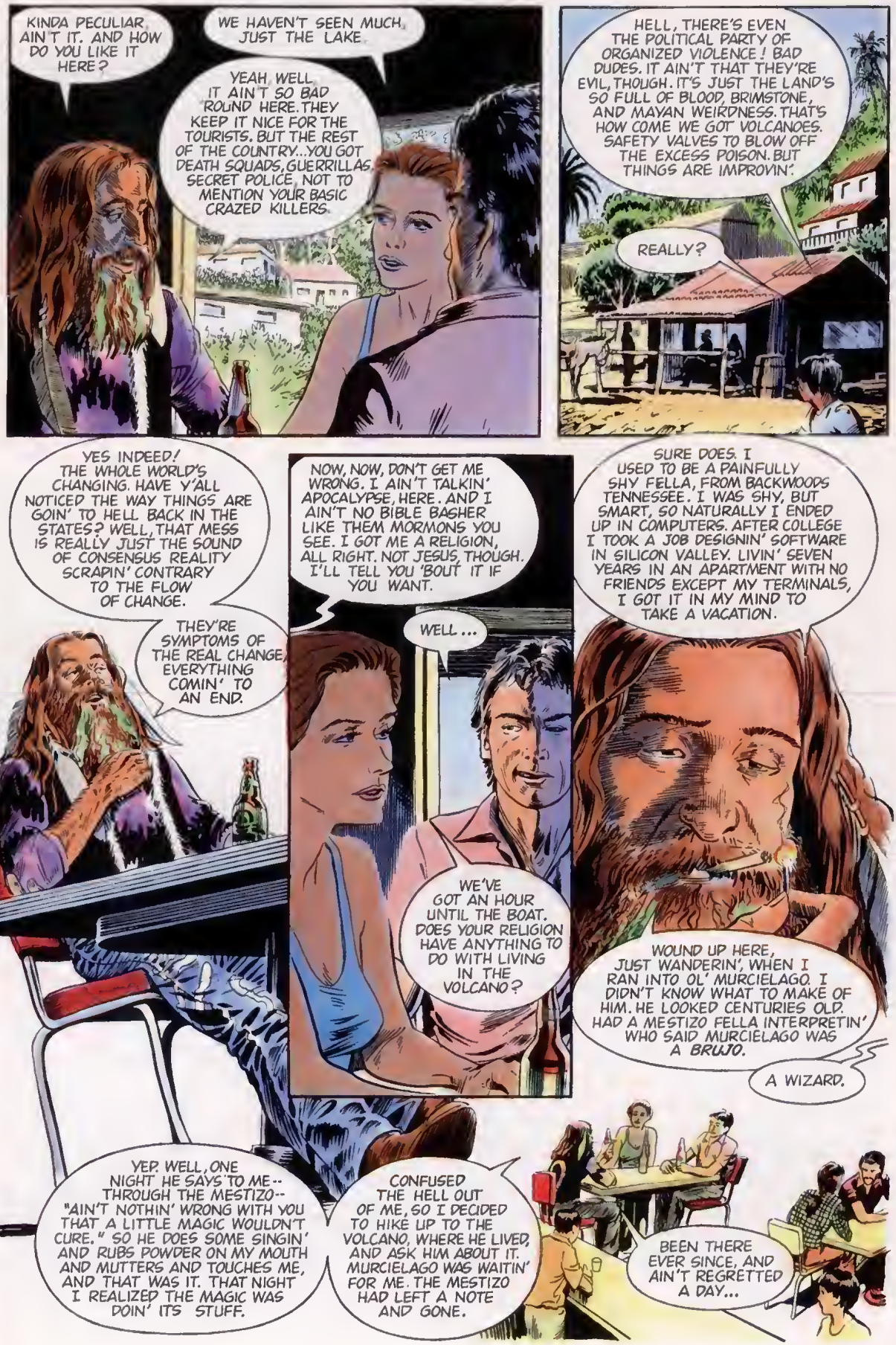
RICHARD DREW HER INTO A KISS AND SHE FELT AGAIN THE EXPLOSIVE DIZZINESS OF THEIR FIRST KISSES; YET SHE KNEW IT WAS A SHAM, A FALSE MAGIC BORN OF GEOGRAPHY AND THEIR OWN CONTRIVANCE. THERE WAS NO REMEDY FOR THEIR DISSOLUTION.

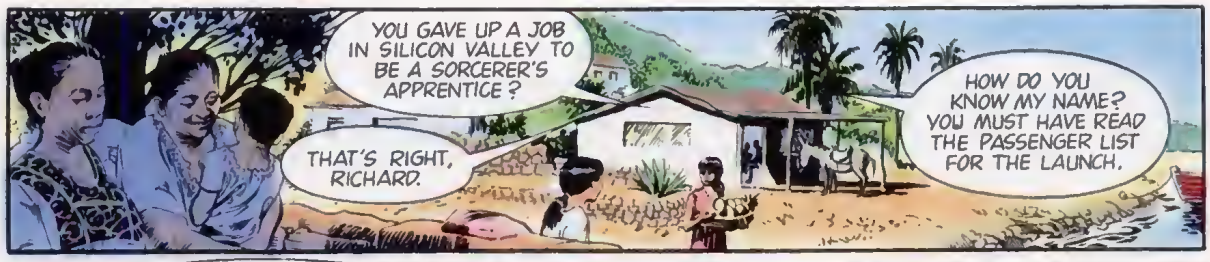
2


ROOSTERS CROWING WAKED HER TO GRAY DAWN LIGHT. SHE REMEMBERED A DREAM ABOUT A FACELESS LOVER.
IT'S NOT WORKING. I CAN'T MAKE IT WITHOUT YOU, BABE.
THAT'S THE PROBLEM. YOU USED TO BE ABLE TO.
WHAT DO YOU MEAN?
YOU KNOW AS WELL AS I DO. WE WEAKEN EACH OTHER, WE DEPRESS EACH OTHER.
SOMETIMES I THINK MARRIAGE IS THIS BIG PASTY SPELL OF CAKES AND VEILS THAT SHRIVELS EVERYTHING IT TOUCHES.
IT'S HIM, RIGHT? YOU STILL WANT TO BE WITH HIM.
THAT'S NOT THE POINT! I STILL LOVE YOU, BUT LOVE... I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO TELL YOU. I'VE SAID IT ALL A HUNDRED TIMES.
MAYBE THIS DISCUSSION IS PREMATURE. LET'S GO ON WITH THE TRIP.
WHERE NEXT? THE MOUNTAINS OF THE MOON? BRAZIL? IT WON'T CHANGE ANYTHING.
I DON'T EVEN UNDERSTAND WHY YOU STILL WANT ME.
PLEASE, LISA. AFTER ELEVEN YEARS YOU CAN TRY A FEW MORE DAYS.
ALL RIGHT. A FEW MORE DAYS.
3


THE LAUNCH THAT RAN ACROSS THE LAKE BETWEEN PANAJACHEL AND SAN AUGUSTÍN HAD SEATS FOR FIFTEEN, NINE OF WHICH WERE OCCUPIED BY A FAMILY OF GERMANS.
THEY REEKED OF CRUDITY AND GOOD HEALTH, AND MADE LISA FEEL REFINED BY COMPARISON. RICHARD CRACKED A JOKE ABOUT THEM, BUT UNFORTUNATELY THEY MUST HAVE UNDERSTOOD ENGLISH.
SAN AUGUSTÍN WAS PROBABLY LIKE WHAT PANAJACHEL HAD BEEN BEFORE TOURISM.
LISA WANTED TO SYMPATHIZE WITH THE INDIAN WOMEN, WITH THEIR POVERTY, BUT THEY APPEARED CONTENT, AND THÉIR WEAVING WAS BETTER THAN ANYTHING SHE HAD EVER DONE.
SHE BOUGHT SEVERAL YARDS OF THE MATERIAL, AND THEN THEY RETURNED TO THE DOCK, TO THE VILLAGE'S ONLY BAR-RESTAURANT.
HOLY MARIJUANA, HIPPIES!
I WONDERED WHERE THEY'D GONE.
SO WHAT DO YOU THINK, BABE?
I THOUGHT WE WERE GOING TO GIVE IT A FEW DAYS.
JESUS, LISA! I MEANT THE WEAVING!
4


I'M SORRY...THE WEAVING'S BEAUTIFUL. WATCHING THE WOMEN WORK, I GOT THE FEELING I WAS WATCHING SOMETHING THAT WENT ON FOREVER. WITH DIFFERENT HANDS, OF COURSE.
AND WHILE THE WEAVERS HAD THEIR OWN LIVES, THAT WAS LESS IMPORTANT THAN WHAT THEY WERE DOING. YOU KNOW? LIKE A LONG, WOVEN MAGIC.
I KNOW WHAT YOU MEAN. HOW ABOUT A BEER?
HE THOUGHT HE HAD HER NOW. HE'D KEEP HER HAPPY, WHIRLING, AN ENDLESS DATE, AN INFINITELY PROLONGED SEDUCTION.
SHE WOULD LOSE HER OWN MOMENTUM AND BE SUCKED INTO THAT LOVING-THE-SPIN ROUTINE. THEN THE MACHINE WOULD STOP AND SHE'D BE PLASTERED TO THE SIDE OF THE MARRIAGE LIKE A WET BLOUSE, NEEDING A HAND TO LIFT HER OUT.
THANKS.
POR NADA. LISTEN...
MIND IF I JOIN YOU FOLKS?
I'M DOWDY. BELIEVE IT OR NOT, THAT'S A NAME, NOT A SELF-DESCRIPTION.
I LIVE UP YONDER. BEEN THERE GOIN' ON FOUR YEARS.
INSIDE THE VOLCANO?
YEP! GOT ME A LITTLE SHACK BACK IN UNDER THE LIP. HOT IN THE SUMMER, FREEZIN' IN THE WINTER, AND NONE OF THE COMFORTS. I GOT TO BUST MY TAIL ON SECRETARIAT THERE, JUST TO HAUL SUPPLIES.
WHY DO YOU LIVE IN A VOLCANO?
5


KINDA PECULIAR, AIN'T IT. AND HOW DO YOU LIKE IT HERE?
WE HAVEN'T SEEN MUCH, JUST THE LAKE.
YEAH, WELL IT AIN'T SO BAD 'ROUND HERE. THEY KEEP IT NICE FOR THE TOURISTS. BUT THE REST OF THE COUNTRY...YOU GOT DEATH SQUADS, GUERRILLAS, SECRET POLICE, NOT TO MENTION YOUR BASIC CRAZED KILLERS.
HELL, THERE'S EVEN THE POLITICAL PARTY OF ORGANIZED VIOLENCE! BAD DUDES. IT AIN'T THAT THEY'RE EVIL, THOUGH. IT'S JUST THE LAND'S SO FULL OF BLOOD, BRIMSTONE, AND MAYAN WEIRDNESS. THAT'S HOW COME WE GOT VOLCANOES. SAFETY VALVES TO BLOW OFF THE EXCESS POISON. BUT THINGS ARE IMPROVIN'.
REALLY?
YES INDEED! THE WHOLE WORLD'S CHANGING. HAVE Y'ALL NOTICED THE WAY THINGS ARE GOIN' TO HELL BACK IN THE STATES? WELL, THAT MESS IS REALLY JUST THE SOUND OF CONSENSUS REALITY SCRAPIN' CONTRARY TO THE FLOW OF CHANGE.
THEY'RE SYMPTOMS OF THE REAL CHANGE, EVERYTHING COMIN' TO AN END.
NOW, NOW, DON'T GET ME WRONG. I AIN'T TALKIN' APOCALYPSE, HERE. AND I AIN'T NO BIBLE BASHER LIKE THEM MORMONS YOU SEE. I GOT ME A RELIGION, ALL RIGHT. NOT JESUS, THOUGH. I'LL TELL YOU 'BOUT IT IF YOU WANT.
WELL...
WE'VE GOT AN HOUR UNTIL THE BOAT. DOES YOUR RELIGION HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH LIVING IN THE VOLCANO?
SURE DOES. I USED TO BE A PAINFULLY SHY FELLA, FROM BACKWOODS TENNESSEE. I WAS SHY, BUT SMART, SO NATURALLY I ENDED UP IN COMPUTERS. AFTER COLLEGE I TOOK A JOB DESIGNIN' SOFTWARE IN SILICON VALLEY. LIVIN' SEVEN YEARS IN AN APARTMENT WITH NO FRIENDS EXCEPT MY TERMINALS, I GOT IT IN MY MIND TO TAKE A VACATION.
WOUND UP HERE, JUST WANDERIN', WHEN I RAN INTO OL' MURCIELAGO. I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO MAKE OF HIM. HE LOOKED CENTURIES OLD. HAD A MESTIZO FELLA INTERPRETIN' WHO SAID MURCIELAGO WAS A *BRUJO*.
A WIZARD.
YEP. WELL, ONE NIGHT HE SAYS TO ME-- THROUGH THE MESTIZO-- "AIN'T NOTHIN' WRONG WITH YOU THAT A LITTLE MAGIC WOULDN'T CURE." SO HE DOES SOME SINGIN' AND RUBS POWDER ON MY MOUTH AND MUTTERS AND TOUCHES ME, AND THAT WAS IT. THAT NIGHT I REALIZED THE MAGIC WAS DOIN' ITS STUFF.
CONFUSED THE HELL OUT OF ME, SO I DECIDED TO HIKE UP TO THE VOLCANO, WHERE HE LIVED, AND ASK HIM ABOUT IT. MURCIELAGO WAS WAITIN' FOR ME. THE MESTIZO HAD LEFT A NOTE AND GONE.
BEEN THERE EVER SINCE, AND AIN'T REGRETTED A DAY...







AS SOON AS DOWDY HAD GONE RICHARD ASKED LISA IF SHE WANTED A LAST LOOK AT THE WEAVING, BUT SHE TOLD HIM SHE WOULD LIKE TO MEET MURCIELAGO. HE ARGUED BRIEFLY, THEN ACQUIESCED.



TO PASS THE TIME SHE BOUGHT A NOTEBOOK FROM A TINY STORE, AND SAT OUTSIDE THE BAR SKETCHING. RICHARD **OOHED** AND **AHHED** OVER THE SKETCHES, BUT IN HER JUDGEMENT THEY WERE LIFELESS. ACCURATE, YET UNINSPIRED.

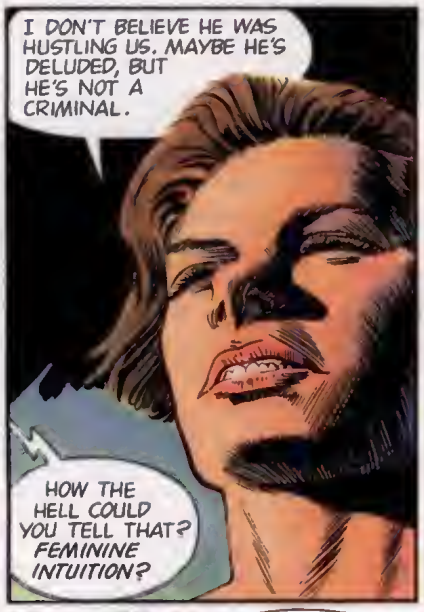


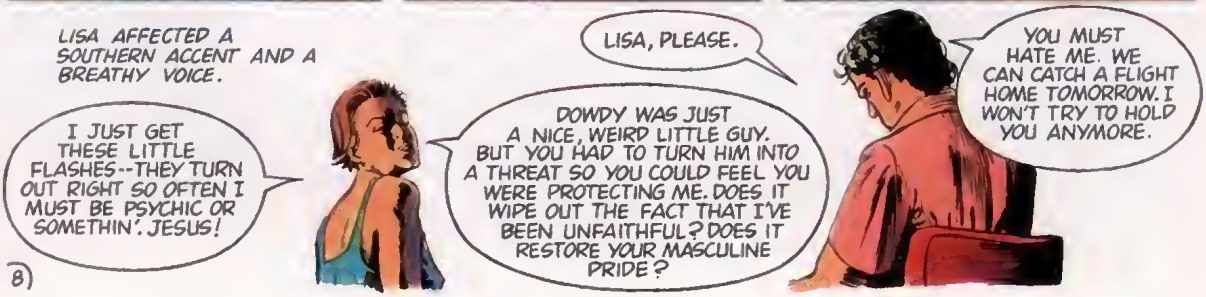

TOWARD FOUR O'CLOCK THUNDERHEADS MUSCLED UP FROM BEHIND THE VOLCANO AND THEY RETREATED INTO THE BAR
LISA DID NOT INTEND TO GET DRUNK, BUT SHE FOUND HERSELF DRINKING TO RICHARD'S RHYTHM. AFTER SIX BOTTLES, WALKING TO THE BATHROOM BECAME AN ADVENTURE IN VERTIGO.

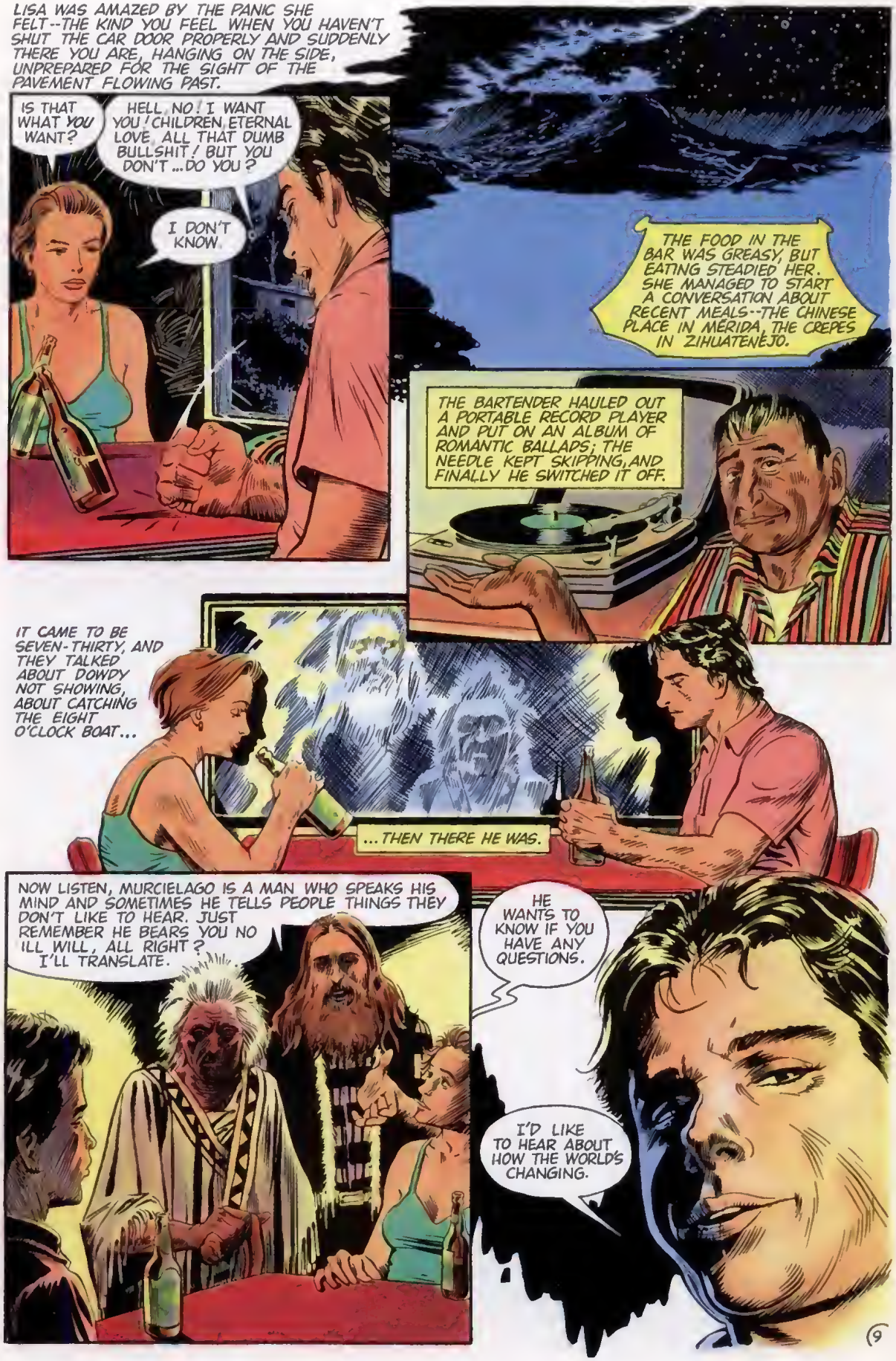

THE BATHROOM SERVED TO MAKE HER DRUNKER. IT WAS A REEKING CHAMBER OF HORRORS.
FROM THE NARROW WINDOW SHE WATCHED THE STORM, STARING AT THE SCENE WITH SOMETHING LIKE LONGING, AS IF IT HELD THE PROMISE OF RESOLUTION.


THEY MIGHT NOT COME. WHAT WITH THE RAIN. PROBABLY FOR THE BEST. I'M SURE HE WAS SETTING US UP FOR A ROBBERY.
YOU'RE PARANOID. IF HE WERE GOING TO ROB US, HE'D PICK A SPOT WHERE THERE WEREN'T ANY SOLDIERS.


WELL, HE'S GOT SOMETHING IN MIND... THOUGH THAT STUFF ABOUT HIS OWN DOUBTS TENDED TO SANDBAG ANY NOTION THAT HE WAS HUSTLING US.


I DON'T BELIEVE HE WAS HUSTLING US. MAYBE HE'S DELUDED, BUT HE'S NOT A CRIMINAL.
HOW THE HELL COULD YOU TELL THAT? FEMININE INTUITION?


LISA AFFECTED A SOUTHERN ACCENT AND A BREATHY VOICE.
I JUST GET THESE LITTLE FLASHES--THEY TURN OUT RIGHT SO OFTEN I MUST BE PSYCHIC OR SOMETHIN'. JESUS!
LISA, PLEASE.
DOWDY WAS JUST A NICE, WEIRD LITTLE GUY. BUT YOU HAD TO TURN HIM INTO A THREAT SO YOU COULD FEEL YOU WERE PROTECTING ME. DOES IT WIPE OUT THE FACT THAT I'VE BEEN UNFAITHFUL? DOES IT RESTORE YOUR MASCULINE PRIDE?
YOU MUST HATE ME. WE CAN CATCH A FLIGHT HOME TOMORROW. I WON'T TRY TO HOLD YOU ANYMORE.


LISA WAS AMAZED BY THE PANIC SHE FELT--THE KIND YOU FEEL WHEN YOU HAVEN'T SHUT THE CAR DOOR PROPERLY AND SUDDENLY THERE YOU ARE, HANGING ON THE SIDE, UNPREPARED FOR THE SIGHT OF THE PAVEMENT FLOWING PAST.
IS THAT WHAT YOU WANT?
HELL, NO! I WANT YOU! CHILDREN, ETERNAL LOVE, ALL THAT DUMB BULLSHIT! BUT YOU DON'T ...DO YOU?
I DON'T KNOW.
THE FOOD IN THE BAR WAS GREASY, BUT EATING STEADIED HER. SHE MANAGED TO START A CONVERSATION ABOUT RECENT MEALS--THE CHINESE PLACE IN MÉRIDA, THE CREPES IN ZIHUATENEJO.
THE BARTENDER HAULED OUT A PORTABLE RECORD PLAYER AND PUT ON AN ALBUM OF ROMANTIC BALLADS; THE NEEDLE KEPT SKIPPING, AND FINALLY HE SWITCHED IT OFF.
IT CAME TO BE SEVEN-THIRTY, AND THEY TALKED ABOUT DOWDY NOT SHOWING, ABOUT CATCHING THE EIGHT O'CLOCK BOAT...
...THEN THERE HE WAS.
NOW LISTEN, MURCIELAGO IS A MAN WHO SPEAKS HIS MIND AND SOMETIMES HE TELLS PEOPLE THINGS THEY DON'T LIKE TO HEAR. JUST REMEMBER HE BEARS YOU NO ILL WILL, ALL RIGHT? I'LL TRANSLATE.
HE WANTS TO KNOW IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS.
I'D LIKE TO HEAR ABOUT HOW THE WORLD'S CHANGING.


DOWDY REPEATED THE QUESTION IN CAKCHIQUEL, AND MURCIELAGO BEGAN TO SPEAK, STARING AT RICHARD, HIS VOICE A GRAVELLY WHISPER.
HE SAYS THE WORLD IS NOT ONE BUT MANY, THOUSANDS UPON THOUSANDS OF WORLDS. EVEN THOSE WHO DO NOT HAVE THE POWER OF CLEAR SIGHT CAN PERCEIVE THIS IF THEY CONSIDER THE MYRIAD REALITIES OF THE WORLD THEY DO SEE.
IT'S EASIEST TO IMAGINE THE THOUSANDS OF WORLDS AS DIFFERENT-COLORED LIGHTS ALL FOCUSED ON A SINGLE POINT.
WHAT'S HAPPENIN' NOW IS THAT THE STRONGEST LIGHT -- THE ONE MOST RESPONSIBLE FOR DETERMININ' THE CHARACTER OF THAT POINT -- IS STARTIN' TO SHINE BRIGHT AND DOMINATE.
WHEN IT HAS GAINED DOMINANCE, THE OLD AGE WILL END AND THE NEW BEGIN. THIS PLACE, LAKE ATITLÁN, IS ONE OF THOSE WHERE THE DAWN HAS COME EARLY, WHERE THE LIGHT OF THE NEW AGE SHINES THE STRONGEST. HE'S TELLIN' YOU THIS BECAUSE YOU WILL BE MORE A PART OF THE NEW AGE THAN THE OLD.
SURELY YOU MUST HAVE NOTICED THE BREAKDOWN OF SYSTEMS, ECONOMIES, GOVERNMENTS. THIS IS DUE TO THE FACT THAT THE LIGHT THAT EMPOWERED THEM IS FADING.
I DON'T MEAN TO BE IMPERTINENT, BUT MURCIELAGO LOOKS PRETTY FRAIL. HE CAN'T HAVE MUCH OF A ROLE TO PLAY IN ALL THIS.
MURCIELAGO HAS NO TIME TO WASTE WITH FOOLS. BUT BECAUSE YOU ARE NOT A TOTAL FOOL, AND NEED INSTRUCTION, HE WILL ANSWER. DAY BY DAY HIS POWER GROWS, AND AT NIGHT THE VOLCANO IS BARELY ABLE TO CONTAIN HIS FORCE. SOON HE WILL SHED THIS FRAILTY AND FLOW BETWEEN THE FORMS OF HIS SPIRIT.
DO YOU HAVE A QUESTION?
WHAT DOES HE THINK ABOUT US?
I WILL NOT TELL YOU WHAT YOU ARE. YOU KNOW THAT, AND HAVE SHAME IN THE KNOWLEDGE. WHAT YOU WILL BE IS MANIFEST, SOON YOU WILL KNOW THAT. YOU AND THE MAN WILL PART AND COME TOGETHER MANY TIMES, FOR THOUGH YOU ARE LOVERS, YOU ARE NOT TRUE COMPANIONS AND YOU BOTH MUST FOLLOW YOUR OWN WAYS.
I WILL FREE THE HOOKS THAT TEAR AT YOU AND GIVE YOU BACK YOUR NATURES.
WHEN THIS IS DONE YOU MAY SHARE EACH OTHER, PART AND COME TOGETHER, WITHOUT SADNESS OR WEAKNESS.
HE WANTS TO MAKE YOU A GIFT.
YOU MUST SWALLOW THEM ONE AT A TIME, AND HE WILL CHANNEL HIS POWER THROUGH THEM.
IT'S SOME SORT OF DRUG, RIGHT? TAKE FOUR AND I WON'T CARE WHAT HAPPENS.
10


LIFE IS A DRUG, MAN! YOU THINK ME AND THE OL' BOY ARE GONNA GET YOU HIGH AND BOOST YOUR TRAVELER'S CHECKS? SHIT, YOU AIN'T THINKIN' CLEAR.
MAYBE THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO DO, AND I'M NOT FALLING FOR IT.
THEY'RE NOT GOING TO HURT US. WHY DON'T YOU TRY IT?
YOU BELIEVE THIS OLD FRAUD? AND WHAT HE SAID ABOUT US?
I'D LIKE TO--IT'S BETTER THAN WHAT WE HAVE.
THE LAMPLIGHT FLICKERED, THEN STEADIED, AND SO DID HE. ELEVEN YEARS OF WRONG-THINKING SEEMED TO BURN AWAY, AND THE OLD RICHARD WAS SHINING THROUGH. CHRIST, SHE WANTED TO SAY, YOU'RE REALLY IN THERE!
AW, HELL! HE WHO STEALS MY PURSE STEALS ONLY FORTY CENTS ON THE DOLLAR, RIGHT?
MURCIELAGO SANG, BUILDING A FIERCE RHYTHM. HE SIGNALED RICHARD AND GRUNTED EACH TIME A SEED WENT DOWN, PUTTING--LISA THOUGHT--SOME MAGICAL ENGLISH ON IT.
WHERE ARE MINE?
IT'S DIFFERENT FOR YOU. HE HAS TO ANOINT YOU, TOUCH YOU.
RICHARD, ARE YOU OKAY?
RICHARD WOULD NORMALLY HAVE CRACKED A JOKE ABOUT DIRTY OLD MEN, BUT HE WAS STARING OUT THE WINDOW AT SHADOWY FIGURES.
YEAH. DON'T WORRY. I'M JUST THINKING.
MURCIELAGO PULLED OUT A BOTTLE OF IODINE-COLORED LIQUID AND BEGAN TO SING AGAIN--A SOFTER, LESS HURRIED SONG WITH THE RHYTHM OF FADING ECHOES.
KEEP 'EM SHUT. THE STINGING WILL PASS.

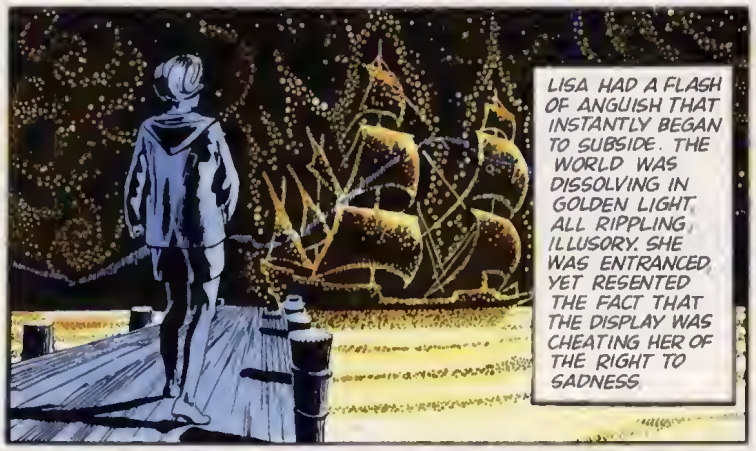

THAT'S ALL, FOLKS! NO DIRTY TRICKS, NOTHIN' UP HIS SLEEVE. JUST GOOD OL' NEW-FANGLED, STICK-TO-YOUR-SOUL MAGIC.
CAN YOU FEEL IT, BROTHERS AND SISTERS? FEEL IT WORMIN' ITS WAY THROUGH YOUR BONES?
MMMM.
DO WE PAY HIM ANYTHING?
THERE'LL COME A DAY WHEN THE ANSWER'S YES, BUT NOT NOW.
GOODBYE.
YEAH, SEE YA.
THEY WERE MOSTLY SILENT. LISA FELT CLOSE TO RICHARD. A TRIBUTE TO PAST CLOSENESS, BECAUSE THINGS WERE CHANGING BETWEEN THEM.
THE FIRST REAL INKLING OF HER GIFT WAS WHEN SHE NOTICED THE TRUE COLORS OF THE STARS.
IN THEIR ROOM, IN THE DARK, POINTILISTIC FIRES BLOOMED AND FADED IN MIDAIR. FURNITURE GLOWED GOLDEN AROUND THE EDGES.
LISA CAME TO SEE SO MUCH LIGHT THAT IT DISCONCERTED HER: SHE WISHED FOR A MOMENT'S NORMALCY, AND HER WISH WAS GRANTED. IT COULD BE CONTROLLED WITH EASE. SHE TOLD RICHARD SOME OF WHAT SHE HAD SEEN.
SOUNDS LIKE HALLUCINATIONS.
NO, THAT'S NOT HOW IT FEELS. HOW ABOUT YOU?
I HAVE THIS SENSE OF MOTION, OF SPEED. I'M HAVING THESE THOUGHTS THAT OUGHT TO SCARE ME, BUT DON'T.
I UNDERSTAND THAT WHAT THE OLD GUY SAID ABOUT US PARTING IS TRUE, FOR THE BEST. ALL THAT.
DO YOU WANT TO MAKE LOVE?
12


NO OFFENSE, BUT I'M NOT SURE I COULD CONCENTRATE ON IT JUST NOW. YOU THINK WE MIGHT NOT HAVE ANOTHER CHANCE?
I'M JUST HORNY IS ALL.
GOD, LISA. YOU PICK THE WEIRDEST TIMES TO GET AROUSED.
YOU'VE PICKED SOME PRETTY WEIRD TIMES YOURSELF. LIKE IN JIM AND KAREN'S BATHROOM.
I WAS DRUNK.
FOR A WHILE THEY TOLD STORIES ABOUT WHAT THEIR VARIOUS FRIENDS MIGHT DO IN THEIR SHOES.
SHE THOUGHT BACK TO THE FIRST TIME THEY HAD BEEN TOGETHER, HOW PROTECTED SHE HAD FELT. MARRIAGE SOUGHT TO INSTITUTIONALIZE THOSE FEELINGS, BUT ALL IT DID WAS LESSEN THEIR INTENSITY AND OPEN YOU UP FOR FAILURE. LIKE WITH SEASHELLS, YOU COULD PUT YOUR EAR TO ONE AND HEAR THE OCEAN BREAKING ON A DESERTED SHORE. BUT THE SHELLS WERE ALWAYS EMPTY, UNFULFILLED. DEEDS FILL THEM, SAID AN ALMOST-VOICE INSIDE HER HEAD.
SOMEBODY SHRIEKED IN THE COURTYARD, FOLLOWED BY SHOUTS IN SPANISH AND BROKEN ENGLISH. A SCREAM OF PURE TERROR, THEN SILENCE.
ANOTHER SHOUT IN SPANISH -- SHE RECOGNIZED THE WORD DOCTOR.
SSSSST!
IT WAS THE GUATEMALAN MAN FROM DINNER THE NIGHT BEFORE.
POLICIA... MALOS! COMMUNISTAS! GUERRILLAS!
OKAY.
13


LISA WAS FROZEN BY THE ATTACK, HALF-DISBELIEVING THAT RICHARD WAS CAPABLE OF SUCH DECISIVE ACTION.
AMIGOS!
I COULDN'T LET HIM SHOOT. I DIDN'T HAVE A CHOICE.
LISA WANTED TO CONSOLE HIM, BUT SHE SENSED A GULF BETWEEN THEM THAT NOTHING COULD BRIDGE. THEIR INTIMATE CONNECTIONS -- HOOKS, MURCIELAGO CALLED THEM -- WERE RECEDING.
YOU?
HE WAS GOING TO SHOOT.
VAMANOS!
BLA-BLAM
I'M A MEDIC. COMO UN DOCTOR.
THE SCENE HAD AN AIR OF MYTHIC SIGNIFICANCE -- A CHANCE MEETING BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN.
JESUS CHRIST!
THE SOLDIERS TORTURE HIM. THEY THINK HE'S GUERRILLERO, BECAUSE HE IS MY COUSIN. BUT HE IS JUST A STUDENT.
IT IS GOOD YOU ARE HERE. WE THINK A FRIEND IS HERE, A DOCTOR. BUT HE'S GONE. PASADO.
HE'S DEAD.
14


ONE OF THE WOMEN WHO HAD BEEN SOBBING LET OUT A WAIL.
CAYETE, GRINGA!
HEY, AMERICAN! YOU WITH THESE PEOPLE OR SOMETHIN'?
OR SOMETHING.
YOU GONNA LET 'EM KILL US? THAT'S WHAT'S HAPPENIN! THE GIRL'S SAYIN' TO LET US GO, BUT THE DUDE'S TELLIN' HER HE WANTS TO MAKE A STATEMENT.
TAKE IT EASY. THE BULLET NEEDS TO COME OUT. I...
UNH!... YOUR FRIEND'S GOING TO DIE. THE BULLET NEEDS TO COME OUT!
HE'S TRYING TO HELP YOU. DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND? HE'S TRYING TO HELP!
WHY YOU HELP US?
HEH, HEH...
THE KID HAD BEEN PUZZLED BUT THEN SMILED AND NODDED.
OKAY. BUT HERE IS DANGER WE GO NOW.
RICHARD!
DASE PRISA!
TOYOTA
BEOW
VIP VIP
BLA-BLAM BLAM BLAM
RRRRRM
15

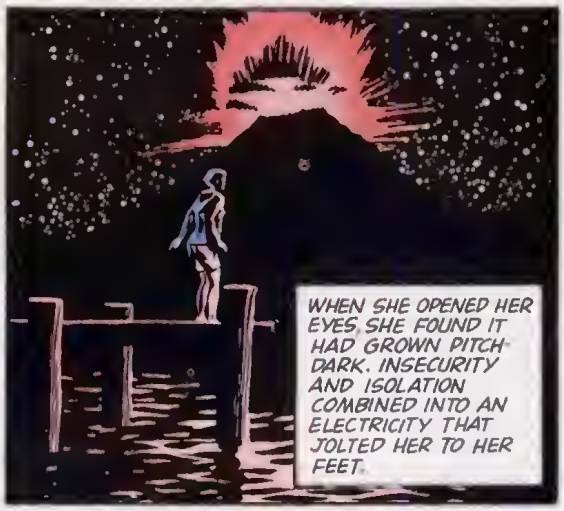








SEATED AT THE END OF THE PIER, SHE SHUT HER EYES AND TRIED TO THINK OF RICHARD. A RAGGED-EDGED VISION APPEARED. HE WAS SITTING ON THE OIL-SMEARED FLOOR OF THE TRUCK, CRADLING THE WOUNDED BOY; THE GIRL WAS BENDING OVER THE BOY. LISA KEPT WATCHING FOR A LONG TIME.



MAYBE THE THING TO DO WOULD BE TO GO SEE MURCIELAGO.



FOUR OR FIVE HOURS WOULD TAKE HER TO THE FAR SIDE OF THE LAKE. IT WOULD GIVE HER TIME TO WORK AT CONTROLLING HER VISION, TO UNDERSTAND SOME OF WHAT SHE SAW.





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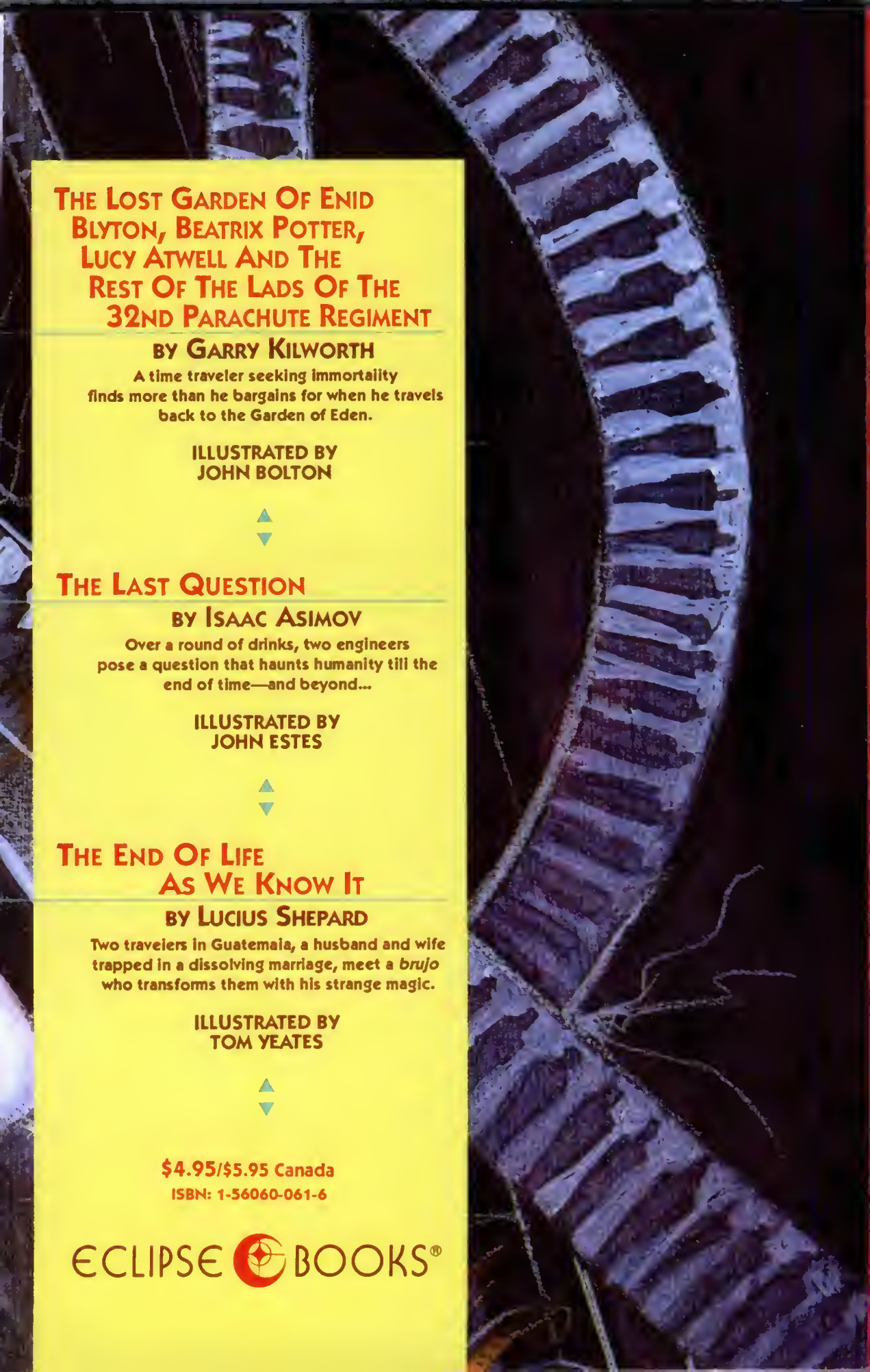
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